

Sermons Preached by the Rev. Raymond Shaheen, D. D.

<u>Year: 1979</u>	<u>SERMON TITLE</u>	<u>TEXT</u>
January 14, 1979	"Erexit"	
January 7, 1979	"Certain People: John The Baptist,	Matthew 11:11
January 31, 1979	"Certain People: North Country Women"	Matthew 15:2-23
February 11, 1979	"All Roads Lead From Jerusalem"	Luke 19:1
January 28, 1979	"Certain People: Matthew"	Matthew 9:1
February 25, 1979	"Certain People: Man of Sand, Man of Rock" (page 1 only)	Matthew 26:75
March 4, 1979	"Certain People: Real Villain"	John 11:47-57
March 11, 1979	"Certain People: Good Start, Bad Finish"	John 6:70-71
March 18, 1979	"Not To Take Christ Seriously"	Luke 23:1-9
April 1, 1979	"Certain People Who Extort Offensivity"	
April 15, 1979	"— And Speaking of Proof —"	Acts 1:8
April 22, 1979	"Certain People: Thomas, Loyal Doubter"	John 11:16
April 29, 1979	"Certain People: The Good and The Upright"	Matthew 27:57
May 6, 1979	"Certain People: Who Follows Orders"	Matthew 27:54
May 26, 1979	"Certain People: That Women"	
July 16, 1979	"What President Carter Won't Tell You"	Mark 7:23
June 3, 1979	"In Praise of the Christian Church"	1 Timothy 4
July 22, 1979	"Mary of Magdala"	John 20:16
June 10, 1979	"About the Trinity"	Matthew 28:18
July 29, 1979	"1-2-3 of Discipleship"	Mark 6:6-13
June 24, 1979	"About Two Boys"	
August 5, 1979	"Our Undiscourageable God"	Luke 15:1
August 12, 1979	"How to Face a Problem"	John 6:5
August 19, 1979	"To Pray: In Jesus' Name"	John 16:23-24
July 1, 1979	"Every Christian a Priest"	1 Peter 2:5
August 26, 1979	"Born-Again"	John 3:1-12
Sept 2, 1979	"The Big Fisherman"	Luke 5:1-11
October 7, 1979	Meditation	1 Corinth. 11:24
July 8, 1979	"Of Fear & Faith"	Mark 4:40
October 7, 1979	Meditation	
October 14, 1979	"The Meaning of This Day"	Psalms 24:6
October 21, 1979	"The Common Mercies of God"	Psalms 51:15
October 28, 1979	"The Ongoing Reformation"	
Nov. 4, 1979	"The Other Side"	Revelation 7:9
Nov. 11, 1979	"Like a Letter From God"	
Nov. 18, 1979	"By Way of Personal Testimony"	Ephesians 2:19

<u>1979 -continued</u>	<u>SERMON TITLE</u>	<u>TEXT</u>
Nov. 25, 1979	"Like A Dying Thief"	Luke 23:43
Dec. 9, 1979	'The Shepherds and The Christmas Truth"	Luke 2:10-11
Dec. 23, 1979	"Mary Had a Baby"	Luke 2:16
Dec. 24, 1979	"Christmas Is Christmas"	Isaiah 9:7

November 5, 1978	All Saints Sunday	<u>"OF SAINTS AND SINNERS"</u>
November 12, 1978	The Twenty-Sixth Sunday After Pentecost	<u>"CERTAIN PEOPLE: PRIME WITNESS"</u>
November 19, 1978	The Twenty-Seventh Sunday After Pentecost	<u>"CERTAIN PEOPLE: THE FORGIVEN ONE"</u>
January 7, 1979	The First Sunday After The Epiphany	<u>"CERTAIN PEOPLE: JOHN THE BAPTIST, THE GREATEST"</u>
February 11, 1979	The Sixth Sunday After The Epiphany	<u>"ALL ROADS LEAD FROM JERUSALEM"</u>
February 25, 1979	The Transfiguration of Our Lord	<u>"CERTAIN PEOPLE: MAN OF SAND, MAN OF ROCK"</u>
March 4, 1979	The First Sunday In Lent	<u>"CERTAIN PEOPLE: REAL VILLAIN"</u>
April 15, 1979	Easter Day	<u>" - - AND SPEAKING OF PROOF - -"</u>
April 22, 1979	The Second Sunday of Easter	<u>"CERTAIN PEOPLE: THOMAS, LOYAL DOUBTER"</u>
April 29, 1979	The Third Sunday of Easter	<u>"CERTAIN PEOPLE: THE GOOD AND UPRIGHT"</u>
May 6, 1979	The Fourth Sunday of Easter	<u>"CERTAIN PEOPLE: WHO FOLLOW ORDERS"</u>

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the Rev. Raymond Shaheen, D.D., Pastor

1979

July 16, 1979	The Sixth Sunday After Pentecost	<u>"WHAT PRESIDENT CARTER WILL NOT TELL YOU TONIGHT"</u> <u>(WHAT'S Wrong)</u>
July 22, 1979	St. Mary Magdalene Sunday	<u>"MARY OF MAGDALA"</u>
July 29, 1979	The Eighth Sunday After Pentecost	<u>" 1-2-3 OF DISCIPLINSHIP"</u>
August 5, 1979	The Ninth Sunday After Pentecost	<u>"OUR UNDISCOURAGEABLE GOD"</u>
August 12, 1979	The Tenth Sunday After Pentecost	<u>"HOW TO FACE A PROBLEM"</u>
August 19, 1979	The Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost	<u>"TO PRAY - IN JESUS' NAME"</u>
August 26, 1979	The Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost	<u>"BORN AGAIN"</u>
September 2, 1979	The Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost	<u>"THE BIG FISHERMAN"</u>
October 7, 1979	World Wide Communion Sunday	<u>"Meditation"</u>
October 14, 1979	Festival of Praise - Dedication of the Enlarged Facility	<u>"THE MEANING OF THIS DAY"</u>
October 21, 1979	The Festival of Harvest	<u>"THE COMMON MERCIES OF GOD"</u>
October 28, 1979	Reformation Sunday	<u>"THE ON-GOING REFORMATION"</u>
November 4, 1979	All Saints' Sunday	<u>"THE OTHER SIDE"</u>
November 11, 1979	The Twenty-Third Sunday After Pentecost	<u>"LIKE A KETTER FROM GOD"</u>
November 18, 1979	The Twenty-Fourth Sunday After Pentecost	<u>"BY WAY OF PERSONAL TESTIMONY"</u>
November 25, 1979	Christ The King Sunday	<u>"LIKE A DYING THIEF"</u>
December 9, 1979	The Second Sunday in Advent	<u>"THE SHEPHERDS AND THE CHRISTMAS TRUTH"</u>
December 24, 1979	The Eve of the Holy Nativity	<u>"CHRISTMAS IS CHRISTMAS"</u>

"CERTAIN PEOPLE: JOHN THE BAPTIST, THE GREATEST"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Matthew 11:11

As some of you may remember, it was announced last September that the sermons for the most part to be preached from this pulpit in Saint Luke Church until next June would be based upon the general theme of "Certain People" who were encountered in one way or another by Jesus Christ. Today our attention is drawn to a man named John the Baptist, of whom Jesus Christ said, as it's recorded in the 11th verse of the 11th chapter of Matthew:

"Truly, I say to you, among those born of
women there has risen no one greater than
John the Baptist . . ."

...that's quite a mouthful -- I'm not so sure you would have agreed.

I'm not so sure that I would have said, "I know exactly what you mean, dear Lord -- I agree with you." Knowing some of you as I do, I think you would have shaken your head in doubt, and with a fair degree of consternation....

...you may have admitted for a moment that he was the country
cousin of Jesus Christ -- you're not forgetting that, are you?
John the Baptist and Jesus were cousins...

...and maybe you may have allowed for the fact that Jesus was
generous when He thought of His relative....

But that isn't why Jesus Christ said this sublime thing about John the Baptist. And you and I have to stick with it now to find out the reason why He could be so generous and so true in His appraisal.

But let's be honest with ourselves -- John the Baptist would have offended us. His life-style would not have been to our liking, I dare say. And yet

albeit he really must have been someone special. Most folks might not have thought so. By our standards today or a few years ago -- honestly -- he would have been declared a 'hippie' -- a first-century type hippie, that is. He had the long, long hair, and there was the beard -- not just because of the beard, but it was uncombed....there were the sandalled feet. And what is more, he didn't much care about the way ordinary people lived. As far as he was concerned, he'd have none of it. And he got himself away to the wilderness, and presumably lived in some kind of a commune. He wanted to do his own thing. And I'm inclined to think that a good many people may not have paid much attention to him, doing his own thing. But nonetheless, he did catch their eyes and he did get their ears. And when he preached there was fire in his eyes and thunder in his voice, and people came out to hear him.

This thing that he wanted to do, fortunately, became first-rate in God's eyes. And maybe that's the point at which we need to begin in our appraisal of this man, whose life-style was so different. You've got to begin at that point: in doing his own thing he never divorced himself from his relationship to other people or from God.

It could be my age, honestly it could be, but I'd like to think that maybe he would always have been that way, had it happened 35 years ago -- I think he would have reacted the same way when people talked about "doing their own thing" -- when people talked about "I've gotta be me!" -- I find no quarrel with that -- as long as they don't allow themselves to believe that they can enjoy the luxury of living in a world all by themselves. That's the kind of a luxury that God doesn't allow anyone. For a man is by nature a social being, and God has given us life that we might share life. And God never intended for any man to do his own thing by himself and withdraw from the rest of the world....and not much care as to what happens to other people, or even to so order his life without reference to God.

This has been my quarrel, I think, with some folks who in recent years have given me to understand - - "Let me alone! I want to do my own thing -- I've gotta be me!" - - that's all right to a point. But the surest way to Hell that I know is for a man never to get himself off of dead center and to think only and always of himself. To the everlasting credit of John the Baptist -- the original 'Let-me-do-my-own-thing' - - he was forever relating it to the purposes of God. And when he withdrew from people it was only that he might come back with greater fervor and intensity to help them in their understanding of their situation and their relationship to God.

So there I think you have it -- one reason why Jesus Christ could say of John the Baptist -- he wanted to reach his full potential as an individual and in his own way, and not to be a rubber stamp of anybody else. At the same time he was always thinking in terms of other people, and primarily in terms of his relationship to Jesus Christ. And that's something grand, and that's something glorious - - to be your own man for Jesus Christ is something entirely different from just being your own man.

It may well be that within the month the Second Annual Pilgrimage of Saint Luke Church to the Holy Land will find a group of us not far from Jerusalem in that little village of Ein Karim, which is remembered as the birthplace of John the Baptist. And there's a German inscription at the entrance to that church with reference to John the Baptist that reads in this way: "Let me prepare the way for Thee, remove each stone that might hinder Thee, to make Thy coming sure and soon." You understand it, don't you -- John the Baptist could not think of himself and himself alone in his relationship with Jesus Christ.

Now that leads me to suggest another reason why Jesus could speak so highly and so warmly of John the Baptist. Bent on doing his own thing, he eventually came to the place where he had to recognize a beautiful measure

of self-effacement. A person who is bent on doing his own thing, if he doesn't watch out, can be on an ego trip as he thinks only of his own ego. John the Baptist went merrily on to a certain place, and then it occurred to him, when the word was gotten around, that Jesus Christ was getting more crowds than John the Baptist was. Now you know that happened for a while. This hell-fire-brimstone-and-damnation preacher that John the Baptist was, he got the crowds alright. And then the word came to him that Jesus Christ was getting greater crowds, and they brought the report to John the Baptist.

And then to the everlasting credit of John the Baptist, he rose to his full stature and said - - "That's exactly the way it ought to be - - ".....and if you want to think of a one-liner in regard to this grand and good person, it was John the Baptist who one day said, "I've got to decrease, and Jesus Christ must increase.....I've got to step aside....I've got to allow the greater glory to come to Jesus Christ." That's the kind of a man John the Baptist was. And Jesus Christ recognized that. And that's why He could say, "Of all the people born of women, none is greater than this man John the Baptist."

I'd like to think that it must have warmed the heart of John the Baptist on occasion to realize that Jesus Christ recognized him as a person. You know, from time to time as I have stood at this sacred desk I've allowed myself a measure of luxury in being very transparent with you. I wish to a degree I could have gone back and starter all over again the last fifteen years -- this whole generation that came at us full-blasted, you know -- gung-ho on doing their own thing - - I was totally unprepared for it. And I know the price that I paid as a father in my own family when it came full-blasted as it did. And I wish now that I could have understood as I think I'm trying to understand now, that while some of us could never fully appreciate the life-style that folks chose that seemed to be so alien to our life-style - - that having said all of that, one still had to deal with a person. And while the life-

style of John the Baptist was so different from Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ never got to the place where He did ~~not~~ see John the Baptist as something less than a person! The basic integrity and the potential that was there!

I'm encouraged when I think of the statement that was made by Augustine, one of the greatest of the early Church fathers -- a magnificent soul, who had in his own way a life-style in his time -- who lived recklessly and in a very daring way and who did things the like of which you and I would never have approved. But Augustine became -- let me say again -- among the greatest of the early Church fathers. And by his own confession he gives credit to two people for the resultant conversion when he was claimed all over again for Jesus Christ: First, he said the prayers of his mother, Monica, who never gave up on him....and secondly, one of the teachers that he had, who despite his life-style, this one teacher in particular never saw Augustine as something less than a person. And you and I ought to be ashamed of ourselves when so often, if we had any relationship with him at all, we allowed the unkempt dress, the uncombed beard, the beads and the sandals, the communal-style living together in the way of the person behind all these things.

It takes a bit of courage to speak like this -- of course it does. And you may chalk it up as a confession. But to the everlasting credit of John the Baptist -- now get this in its proper context -- his life-style may have been different, but he never allowed himself to be alienated from the purposes of God, and from a relationship with other people. And that's the thing that Jesus Christ recognized.

And then since he was for a while on his ego trip, he took second place to Jesus Christ and allowed himself the role of a supporting character. And that, by the way, is what every Christian is meant to be -- a supporting character. And if confession is in order, you might as well know this: this is one of the great professional hazards in the ministry -- if preachers don't watch out,

"GREET"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from
God our Father and from His
Son Jesus Christ, our Blessed
Lord. Amen.

I suppose every one of us reaches a certain period in life when he looks back and he remembers particularly the lessons that were taught to him by his mother. Among those that I recall with true gratitude is the fact that she taught me always to say "Thank you." And I would be negligent to her memory if I did not remember that on this day in particular.

For as I stand at this sacred desk I recognize in your presence the debt that I owe to those pastors who preceded me in this congregation:

- the Mission Developer, the Rev. Dr. Milton J. Bieber;
- the first Pastor of the congregation, the Rev. Frederick J. Eckert;
- my immediate predecessor, the Rev. Dr. Robert E. Lee.

They shepherded you well, and they laid an excellent foundation. And my gratitude is very great to every single member who has provided significant leadership in these years, as all who have served wisely and faithfully.

Now, what to preach upon on this Anniversary Sunday? I had more than one idea. First, I thought I'd try to find the sermon that was preached when the congregation was organized. I couldn't put my fingers upon it -- perhaps the sermon doesn't even exist, and I don't even know who it was that preached that first Sunday, that Sunday in January, 1940.

And then I thought it may be of some interest to you if I went back and found the anniversary programs -- the 5th Anniversary....the 10th.....the 15th, etc.....and then reflect upon what these milestones have been in the life of this congregation.

But, in all honesty, I did not succumb to any of those temptations, for the simple reason that had I, there would have been the tendency to look back and think that the halcyon days of this parish have come and gone. One is grateful for the past -- there's no question about that! -- and one dares not allow himself to be imprisoned in the days that have come and gone and then close the chapters and say that was it. We are in duty bound to think of the present moment and where we're meant to go as the future unfolds. It's in that spirit that I put my fingers upon the spiritual pulsebeat of this parish today, and greet you in a rather unusual manner. You'll be quite surprised when I tell you that the title for this sermon on our Anniversary Sunday is simply this: "GREET." It's a good and a great word.

Now having said that, would you be kind enough to listen while I read a particular passage for you, a selection of Scripture which I dare say is not frequently quoted, and perhaps you will find it a bit tedious to listen to as I read it. It is being read in your hearing that you may underline for yourselves, figuratively speaking, a particular word -- you already know what that word is --- that's used at least 15 different times. There are 16 verses, and this one specific word surfaces sentence by sentence. It's the 16th chapter, which is the closing chapter, of the letter that the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians who lived in the Imperial City of Rome. This is the way it goes, bear with me:

"I COMMEND to you our sister Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchreae, that you may receive her in the Lord as befits the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a helper of many and of myself as well.
Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I but also all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks; greet also the church in their house.
Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert in Asia for Christ.
Greet Mary, who has worked hard among you.
Greet Andronicus and Junias, my kinsmen and fellow prisoners; they are men of note among the apostles, and they were in Christ before me.
Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord.
Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys.
Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ.
Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus.
Greet my kinsman Herodion.
Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus.
Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa.
Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord.
Greet Rufus, eminent in the Lord, also his mother and mine.
Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brethren who are with them.
Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them.
Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you."

Well, greet. It's a grand and it's a good word. It's an exceedingly precious thing that it has occurred at all.

Now you have to know why I say that. The letter was written by this man who was not always a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. In fact he had fought against Christ. And then he had -- which is always possible, don't you dare forget it, it's the one thing in particular that the Christian must always remember -- there is always the possibility of conversion. And that happened to this man Paul. He became a brand new person altogether in Jesus Christ. And enflamed, he hopped, skipped and jumped around Asia Minor, establishing this congregation and that congregation. Good pastor that he was, he kept in touch with those congregations, having a shepherding concern for them. They'd send representatives to him, and he'd send somebody back to them.

And then he'd try to straighten out their problems for them -- always with a pastor's heart.

He had noble dreams for himself. He told God how he'd like to end his years, but even God doesn't always satisfy the requests of His saints . . .

-- he wanted one day to get to Spain -- but it didn't come off;

-- he wanted to go to Rome -- and when he did, it wasn't in triumph,

he went a frail, feeble old man, and a prisoner at that.

Now having said all that, you'd think he would be bitter by this time, disappointed and disillusioned. How can anyone have such a happy thing as saying, "Greet one another!"? -- and always with appreciation. But that's that man Paul for you, a man possessed by the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

And when he thought of that congregation, he thought not simply of a roster with a series of names, but he thought of a congregation made up of individuals. And that's the point that you must never forget when you deal with a congregation. It's not a people grouped together, but individuals who are linked by the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

I try to keep that in mind constantly, and I ask all the people who serve on this staff to keep that in mind. I ask every member who serves on the staff of Saint Luke Church to realize that he's here to provide a pastoral ministry. And a pastoral ministry is a ministry that's given to people. And when you think of people you think of individuals. I've told you this before, and I hope you'll bear with me when I tell you again today. On occasion I come here on a Saturday night....the night janitor has probably done his work by that time, the Nave is darkened. And I sit where you're seated...

...and I sit where you are seated.....and I sit where you are seated....

....and I try to think of you as individuals who will be here on a given Lord's Day. And whatever it is that God may place in my heart to say, I hope that I might be able to say it to you as an individual.

One of the things we covet for ourselves here in Saint Luke Church is that we may know our people by name. It takes a bit of doing, of course it does, when you have more than three thousand baptized people, more than a thousand families, more than two thousand confirmed and communing. But when we think of people who are members of this parish, we try to think of them as individuals. And that's exactly what the Apostle Paul was doing in this letter. He named them. I'll say again -- it takes a bit-of-doing to read this part of the Bible, this particular passage -- it is tedious. But you ought to do it. And I'm going to encourage you, this afternoon or tonight, to turn to that wonderful Epistle to the Romans, one of the greatest things that Paul ever

wrote, and read that closing chapter. The names you may find wellnigh unpronounceable, but struggle with them just the same, and notice how he has a qualifying phrase in practically every instance.....

-- take Phoebe as an example. He doesn't refer to her only as a deaconess, but he does say that "Whatever she requires of you, meet her need."

Now with all the strength that I can command, that's the place at which I'd like to level for a while.

Every single person who crosses the threshold of Saint Luke Church is a person in need. You may pride yourself with being rather self-sufficient, and some of you may think that you can get along without the rest of us, but I have news for you, my friend. Many of us who are here right now are here for the simple reason that we know that we can't get along without you! There are some of us who are here right now because we dread to think what lies ahead, if we could not have the inspiration and the encouragement that comes from being in a company of people such as you. From my vantage-point as your Pastor, I know the needs that some of you have . . .

-- the son-in-law who is here -- his wife's mother died last night (Stan Benning).

...one crosses the threshold of this place with a concern such as that! You may not know that, had I not told you.

-- the family that came, crossing the threshold at the earlier service, to find re-orientation in life after the crisis of last week -- you may not have known that.

And while we look at one another rather self-composed and fairly well stabilized, every single one of us is a person in need. And so the Apostle Paul says, as he mentions Phoebe by name -- "Whatever it is that she requires, see that she gets it."

Don't you dare misunderstand me -- not because I'd want to be always on the getting end of things -- but if I would not become a member of the Christian church because of my love for the Lord Jesus Christ, beginning at that point, I think I'd be attracted to the Christian church because I find within the church a company of the concerned. That's the way the church was at the beginning -- it was from within the Family of God that the widows were ministered to and weren't left bereft....it was from within the Family of God that the orphans were cared for....it was from within the Family of God that the people ministered to the sick and the sorrowing....it was from within the Family of God that there are arms stretched forth to others who are finding it diffi-

cult to persevere with patience the course they have had to run. So when you think of people, think of them as people with a need, and a need which, by the grace of God, could be met within the Family of God.

I've known some exceedingly precious moments as your Pastor. None, I dare say, is greater than when I can stand with a new Christian and see a life being committed to Jesus Christ. But I also know precious moments when I can meet with the Committee on Staff, or with the Church Council, and say, "Now these are areas of need that must be met if Saint Luke Church is to justify her existence as a congregation. And one of these days I'd like to sit down with the Associate Pastor and anybody else who would care to do it, and review the past of this congregation, and see how at different stages God called upon us to meet a brand new need.

-- I remember when we thought in terms of meeting a need, providing full-time direction to those who would sing, and we added a staff member known as a Choirmaster and Organist....

-- I remember when we thought in terms of shoring up the Christian Education program....we added a staff member to direct those efforts....

-- I remember when it became very plain to us that a congregation that had 500 young people between the ages of 12 and 22 could well afford to have a staff member who would be geared to their needs....

-- None has brought me greater joy than when we gave to a staff member the portfolio that's labeled in this manner: Ministry To People With Special Needs.

So when you think of individuals, think of them and their needs. And when you greet one another, condition yourself to the fact that when you pay attention to that person, -- that's what it is to greet a person, to greet a person is to pay attention to that person, to recognize that that person exists.

And one of the things that we want to do as soon as we can -- we've given our efforts and energies to a number of other things -- is to provide opportunities for people to get together in small groups. And only as we get together in small groups do we get to know one another....and as we get to know one another, we know where they're coming from and what their needs may be.

Let me give you a very simple homespun illustration. It has nothing to do with a group but it has something to do with recognizing a person as a person. We have a rather nondescript (and I say that kindly) individual who delivers our flowers on a Saturday morning. Yesterday as I worked at my desk I kept the door ajar as he went by.

And all of a sudden I noticed he was standing there, about to speak. I had to make the choice --- do I deliberately concern myself with the work on my desk and ignore him? -- or do I pay attention to him? By the grace of God, I paid attention to him.

...and then for 15 minutes the fellow began to blossom. Little did I recognize the things that seemed to be important to him. And, Roy Sparks, it will warm the cockles of your heart when I tell you that this nondescript person told me of how much he appreciates your creative photograph that hangs in the main corridor of the Christian Education Building....

....and then he told me of the places he had been, and brought back precious memories for him. He even went back to the time when our Committee on Art Display had something from up at Harper's Ferry, and that triggered for him a very precious recollection of a very interesting chapter in his life.....

The fellow had a need, a need to express himself, a need to talk about something that was important to him.

O, I could go on by the hours - - you can read it for yourself of how the Apostle Paul names each person, and then with a qualifying phrase, identifies a relationship. When I think of certain people in this parish, immediately there surfaces an identification. As the Apostle Paul said of certain ones, they were people who worked hard. And every now and then when I look at some of you, you have no idea how often I thank God for the way you work so hard! Saint Luke Church is the "church where wonderful things are always happening", and they happen because there are people who want to make them happen, and they work hard at it.

I had a meeting with a staff member on Friday. Among other things, he said to me he couldn't believe that there could be a church such as Saint Luke. He's finding it an exceedingly precious thing in his relationship with us, and I was constrained to say to him, "But it just doesn't happen! It happens because there are people such as you who respond to the grace of God and want it to be that way." So when I think of certain people among you, I thank God that you're hard workers, sharing a partnership with the Lord Jesus Christ.

And then the Apostle Paul talked about people who were yoked with him in prison... ...which simply means they agonized with him in the dark night of the soul. It doesn't

simply mean they were behind bars together. And when I see certain among you I thank God for the way you've dealt patiently with me -- how on occasion I've laid bare my soul to you, and you have been as a stabilizing influence in the name of Jesus Christ.

Said the Apostle Paul -- "greet one another" - - which is simply to say, "Pay attention to one another." Let a person emerge as a person, and then as God gives you the wisdom and a measure of love, meet that person's need.

I can't tell you when it's going to be -- I wish I could, but I have given up predicting -- the Enlarged Facility will be completed. The contractor will pack up his equipment and go away, and then on a Sunday, at the rear of the Nave, there will be doors opened that lead to a corridor, and opposite the corridor, directly opposite the level where you are now, there will be a very nice, lovely room -- the main room on the main floor. How will we use it? Well, it is a reception area, like a church parlor. But don't settle for that name "church parlor," please don't. I'm going to propose a couple of names. One name I have in mind is "Greeting Room" -- where people can gather together and pay attention to one another in an unhurried way, and just talk with one another, and perhaps discover a need that they could offer to meet in that person's life.

I have known some people who when they have come to church, their whole week has been made because somebody took time to talk to them. Let me give you a very homespun illustration: Back in the community where I first served my Lord as the Pastor, I had my barber who was across the street from the church, a Sicilian, a very delightful person, and God has given me a continuing relationship with him. I usually stop to see him whenever we go back to the Hills of Home. Al used to tell me how his day was made when a particular person walked down the street and smiled at him (in all fairness, I should say that being pretty didn't hurt a bit!)....but his day was made because she smiled, and greeted him.

The going is tough for most of us, no matter how much we may think that we have had it made -- the going is tough for most of us. Greet one another, in the Spirit of Jesus Christ. As we want God to pay attention to us, so we must pay attention to one another. And it's in this way that I greet you on our Anniversary Sunday.

* * * *

(transcribed as recorded)

"CERTAIN PEOPLE: NORTH COUNTRY WOMAN"
(Matthew 15:21-28)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father, and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

We continue today the series of sermons being preached from Saint Luke pulpit upon the general theme of "CERTAIN PEOPLE." Today that particular person is the "NORTH COUNTRY WOMAN." To better serve you as the sermon is being preached, you'll want to keep this passage of Scripture in mind, let me read it for you now:

"Then Jesus went thence, and departed into the coasts of Tyre and Sidon. And, behold, a woman of Canaan came out of the same coasts, and cried unto him, saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou Son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil.

But he answered her not a word. And his disciples came and besought him, saying, Send her away; for she crieth after us.

But he answered and said, I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

Then came she and worshipped him, saying, Lord, help me.

But he answered and said, It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs.

And she said, Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table.

Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour . . . "

People have a way of being remembered, of course they do, and they can be remembered for a variety of reasons. . . .

- some folks are remembered for the way they look...
- some folks we can't forget just for the way they talk...
- some folks we remember by the way they walk...
- some people are remembered for the things they have done,
or for the things they failed to do...
- some people are remembered for what they say -- their words
still echo in our ears, even perhaps as long as God gives
us memory.

While some people are remembered for what they said, a few are remembered because of what was said about them.

Now let me talk to you about this North Country woman. She is a character in the Gospel drama to whom Jesus said four memorable words. You and I wouldn't be talk-

ing about her right now if it weren't for what Jesus Christ said about her. To the end of time, as long as Christians gather together and search the Scriptures they'll always be talking about this one woman -- at one time or another and in one way or another. She will always be part of the Gospel story. Some people are remembered for what they said . . . a few are remembered because of what was said about them.

She was a Canaanite woman who came from the country north of Palestine, a country, by the way, that was hostile to the Jews. You don't even know her name. Really now, you don't even know whether she was a good woman or a bad woman. You only know that once Jesus Christ looked her in the eye and said -- what He seldom said to anyone. In fact, as far as the Scriptures are concerned, He said it only to two people, and both of those people, by the way, happened to be outside the established church. And that's something to think about -- "Woman, you have great faith . . . because of your faith your plea is answered."

This leads us, of course, to a very interesting concept of Jesus that we ought never to forget. People sometimes refer to Him as a 'faith-healer.' For our purpose this morning, you think of Him as a faith-seeker -- that's what He was, all right, and there's chapter and verse in the Bible to prove it. Incidentally, it was His specialty -- no matter where He went, He was looking for it. And when it was absent, the great works that He was inclined to do He just couldn't do....because, as the Bible says, of their unbelief, or their hardness of heart.

I wish I could tell you that His disciples were full of it . . . not always! A realistic reading of the Scriptures introduces us to the fact that every now and then Jesus had to rebuke His disciples -- and why? -- "O ye of little faith." Again and ever so often He takes them to task because they had little faith. He was the great faith-seeker. It was His specialty. He had an eagle eye for that sort of thing.

I am constantly impressed with certain friends of mine who can see things that I can't see, and I think one reason for it may be they look for it. I have been in the company of certain people who have heard birds sing, and I was completely oblivious to the fact that the birds were singing....and I had one friend in particular, who while he lived could identify -- immediately -- the bird by its song, and then go looking for it. I never cease to marvel at certain people in whose company I can be found, who when we are walking down the street can see certain things, because they are looking for something. They keep themselves on the alert for it. And what joy they know when they come upon it.

There are certain people who are gem collectors, I am told, who can find a gem that other people ignore, because they make it their specialty to look for it. Jesus Christ is God-come-to-us-in-human-form and is always looking for that which is part of every man who can respond to Him. And what is faith? It is not intellectual assent. It is trust, it is response. Jesus Christ had this eagle eye for this sort of thing, and significantly enough, He did find it in a most unusual assortment of people. There was seemingly no end to the kind of wonderful things that could happen once He found faith in this person or that person. Now take that woman from up north around Tyre and Sidon as an example.

He had gone into alien country, so to speak -- he had crossed the barrier. He sensed, perhaps, that His days were numbered, He wanted to be away for a little while. But then He was encountered by this certain person, this woman. Now when you read that 15th chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew all over again for yourself, I'll tell you what the bottom line is going to be -- she was a woman who in her desperation threw herself completely on the mercy of Jesus Christ. She didn't string in front of Him any list of meritorious deeds. She knew only one thing: she was in need, and Jesus Christ would be able to satisfy that need....and she remained undiscouraged---in the face of all the obstacles that Jesus Christ seemingly and deliberately put in front of her -- because faith must always have its testing period in order that it might be called by its rightful name.

We've just celebrated an anniversary in the life of this congregation. I wish sometimes the historian would rise up who from this perspective would write the history of this congregation -- and again and again and again there would be a chapter entitled, "The Fruits of Faith" . . .

-- it was in faith that one man, a mission developer on the run, came into this area believing that there could be established a congregation where there was none . . . who when he held his first meeting had a response of only three people. But in faith he went home and slept and prayed, and came back again, so that within a matter of months one hundred people could sign the charter.

We're so far removed from it and we think it seems as though it dropped down fully fashioned from heaven without the struggle of the earnest soul, and without a measure of deliberation. But there they were in that early chapter of their history, wondering if they would be able to continue to exist as a congregation after they got started. And when they knew that they had to have a place of their own -- they had no credit at all with the bank. And one of their own members advanced \$3,500 as the payment for this lot upon which this church now stands.

they, too, can go on an ego trip. And every now and then a preacher has to bring himself up short to remember that his role in life is simply to be a supporting character, a supporting character for Jesus Christ, and never to allow himself to get in the way of Jesus Christ.

When John Brokhoff, Pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in Atlanta, Georgia, was able to put some input on the draftsman's board when the architect was designing that beautiful structure, he insisted that there be carved into stone so that whatever preacher it was who went into the pulpit of that church, as he went up the steps he would read these words: SIR, WE WOULD SEE JESUS.

You get into the picture, too - - parents must be careful lest they allow themselves to be on an ego trip, where their youngsters have to toe the line just in order that their own way may be satisfied, because this is what I see. It takes a bit of doing for a parent even to recognize that his role in life is that of a supporting character -- supportive of this child whose own ego must be given a chance to be expressed....supportive of this child that must grow and develop into a person in his own right.

Congregations have to be very careful - - they, too, can go on an ego trip. And the saddest thing that could ever happen to Saint Luke Church would be that we would think in terms and in terms only of the perpetuation of this congregation as a congregation -- that our own ends are to be satisfied and our own purposes are to be served. This congregation is meant to be supportive of Him who is the Great King and Head of the Church. We don't exist for our own purpose - - we exist for the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Small wonder, then, that Jesus could say of John the Baptist: "You're the greatest - - you're bent on doing your own thing, being your own person, developing your own potential - - - to the glory of God!"

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

-- back in the early 40's -- in faith they built a place of worship twice the size of the number of people they had on their roll.....

We're so far removed from it, it's so easy to forget how much faith it took on their part to believe that God would reward their efforts, and that one day people like us might be able to rise up and call them blessed.

If we wanted to, we could turn this time that we're spending together into an old-fashioned testimonial meeting; and how some of you here and there from my vantage-point as I know you across these two decades could stand up and tell others what has happened in your life -- when you came to the end of the rope and threw yourself completely on the mercy of God and said, "I can't take it any longer! -- God, You've got to do something about it! -- Help me!"

....there are those of you who could do it, and the rest of of us would bow our heads, if not in shame, because it never occurred to us -- then certainly in gratitude because it occurred to you.

It could well be that some of us could honestly say that our greatest need is to have our faith increased. We would like to have more faith. We give lip service to the fact that there are some things that happen only because people have faith. But what's the barrier that we have to cross? We've got to cross the barrier of pride. There are any number of us who because of pride are unwilling to recognize the fact that we're dependent creatures. One of the greatest obstacles that we have to face is the fact that we think that we can go it on our own. I have lived long enough to know that life has a way of driving every man to his knees, eventually. God never made any of us big enough to fend by himself, and when the time comes in pure desperation -- cry out then to God! Believe Him, that He can help. But some of us don't even allow ourselves to think that such a situation could exist! We have to cross that barrier of pride, to admit that we can't do it by ourselves.

I am a firm believer in what's being offered through Alcoholics Anonymous, and one of the basic tenets to which they subscribe is to begin at the point that you can't lick it by yourself. And that's why the curse continues for any number of people, because they think that they can! To the everlasting credit of this woman to whom Jesus Christ spoke those wonderful words -- in pure desperation: "Lord, help me," - - and she came back again and again, believing that He could.

But it also means complete surrender, and trust. And some of us have a measure of trust -- only a measure. I'm reminded about the story they tell about the chap who

seemingly fell over a cliff, and grabbed the branch of a tree and was holding on to it, and then he recognized his plight and he cast his eyes heavenward, of course, and he said, "Help me! Help me!" . . . and the voice from heaven said, "Let go."....and the chap turned back toward heaven and said, "Is there anybody else up there?"

- - this willingness to trust only to a degree may not get us very far.

She is remembered all right -- you don't know a thing about her. And she's recorded in the Gospel as Exhibit A of what's possible when a person with complete trust comes back again and again and believes that God is greater. Maybe that's the point at which some of us have to begin all over again, and then discover for ourselves what wonderful things can really happen.

* * * *

(transcribed as recorded)

"CERTAIN PEOPLE: MATTHEW, THE MAN WHO QUIT HIS JOB"

Matthew 9:9

QUIET our minds and hush our hearts,
O God, that we may be made ready to
give some measure of undivided at-
tention to the interpretation of
Your Holy Word. Amen.

You know what's ordinarily done at this particular point -- the title for the sermon is usually announced, and then there is the text that is read. I'm not going to do that now. But if you don't mind I'd like to make you privy to the kind of thing that goes through my mind occasionally as the sermon is being preached. You're entitled to know that the preacher asks himself certain questions before he may go to the sacred desk and answer some of the questions that may be in your thinking.

As an example, as this sermon was being prepared, again and again I found myself dealing with such questions as this:

-- who, now, will find this sermon that I am about to preach helpful?
....for whom could it be especially meant?

I think any preacher who is worth his salt, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, ought to wrestle with that kind of a question. For every sermon is meant to be effective -- every sermon is meant to be helpful to someone. Naturally, in the jargon of the kids these days, it all depends on 'where you're coming from' as to what it is that you might hear and as to what it is that might be helpful to you in your particular situation. So there is the question that I have been wrestling with: who might find this particular sermon helpful?

I don't want to spin my wheels and I don't want to ask for your time if it doesn't deserve to be spent by giving someone 18 minutes of your attention. I place a high value on your time, even as I place a high value upon mine. Well now, I have an answer to that question. If you're the kind of a person who isn't satisfied with your job, if somehow or another you don't find it spiritually satisfying as it ought to be, then this sermon could be meant for you.

-- if you're the kind of a person who can't quite understand why some people are the way they are, and they're not making much progress in the kind of person that they could become, then this sermon could be meant for you....

-- if you're the kind of person who has questioned on occasion the wisdom of Jesus Christ, and the choices of His friends, and the type of people that He decided upon to be His disciples, then you'll find this sermon helpful....

-- or if you should be the kind of person who doesn't quite understand what

understand what the first step in discipleship is, then take heart, my friend, this sermon will not be preached in vain as far as you're concerned.

Now you can tell I have a measure of excitement about this sermon that I'm going to share with you this morning, because the text in my judgment is one of the really great texts in the Bible. You may not feel that way, again depending upon where you're coming from, but as long as I can remember I have been thrilled by it. For a number of different reasons -- which may become apparent to you as the sermon unfolds. But -- the text: the 9th verse of the 9th chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew:

" . . . Jesus saw a man, named Matthew, at his seat in the custom house, and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And Matthew arose and followed him . . . "

Tell me honestly, do you think it really happened just like that? That's the impression you get: "And Jesus saw a man named Matthew seated at the custom and said to him, 'Follow me,' and Matthew arose and followed him . . . "

Honestly . . . do you really think it happened just like that!

Get it in proper focus -- here is the wandering preacher out of Nazareth, happened to come to Capernaum, and standing there He looks across the way to the custom booth -- there's a man by the name of Matthew seated there, going about his day's work, doing what he's been doing day after day, and then Jesus Christ walks over to him and says, "Follow me." And the man, looks around perhaps a bit, then without any hesitation, closes the ledger...puts the book aside....gets up..... walks away - - - never again to return to that job, but to become a wanderer, following the Master.

Do you really think it happened just like that?

I can't tell you. But I know that's the net result. I know when Matthew was giving us the record of his life in relationship to Jesus Christ and when he was recording for us the life and time of Jesus Christ in the book that bears his name, that's the way he put it down . . . and others recorded it in like manner. This is the net result.

But on occasion you have heard me tell you that there's nothing wrong -- in fact I highly recommend you ask God for the gift of a sanctified imagination. Try to picture it as it was. And this is one justification for making a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, you know -- to be there in this century and to think how it must have been when Jesus

was there, try to picture it that way. You have a right to ask God for the gift of a sanctified imagination because then that enables you to be better qualified to read between the lines, to try to picture it. And under the influence of the Holy Spirit, bear with me now.

Take this setting of Jesus coming to Matthew, and turn it back in the time frame, say 15 years. That puts Jesus, now, not at 30, but as a teen-ager, 15 years of age. And with this sanctified imagination of yours, now, picture Jesus Christ on a special assignment for his mother. It could well be that Joseph by this time had died -- maybe not. But it's income tax time. And Mary says to Jesus, "Now you go over to Capernaum -- that's where they collect the taxes -- and you see that ours are paid. Here's the money." So Jesus, on special assignment, goes to Capernaum. And as He goes to Capernaum, and He gets near to where the taxes are being collected, He is horrified by what He hears -- there's screaming and shouting and yelling -- there's this dramatic expression, as anyone who has traveled in the Middle East knows how people can be volatile and explosive in their behavior. What happened?

In all likelihood this is what's happened. It was par for the course, it happened every day: that tax collector is exacting an exorbitant sum of money. Now you have to understand it this way. The tax schedules were not as we now have them in our day. But Rome as the occupying authority could say to someone whom they would designate, a Jew among Jews -- "Now you return so much from your province or your territory -- this is what we expect you to give to us at year's end." And then gave the man all the latitude in the world to lay his own particular levy, as the case may be . . . and then he would endeavor to bleed as much as he could from this person and that person -- that was always a possibility. And that's exactly what was happening now. And the teenager, Christ, representing his mother, standing there by the side, sees the tax collector bleeding this poor fellow.

What else has happened? In all likelihood, when he exacts this exorbitant sum, and the man says "I can't pay it! -- I don't have it! Why, you'll ruin me!" . . . then this diabolical character who is a tax collector -- it's easy for him to be that kind of person -- said, "I'll loan you the money" at a very high rate of interest. Now this is the kind of thing to which Jesus Christ as a lad is being exposed.

...and if you let me say it quite parenthetically -- my mind goes back very quickly to the days when I was in school, in grade school, and we had a teacher talking to us about Abraham Lincoln. You may remember it yourself, how Abraham Lincoln for the first time in his life sees a human being put on the block and sold . . . and our teacher with a great deal of sensitivity told us how Abraham Lincoln is supposed to have said, "If I ever get a chance to hit that thing, I'll hit it hard."

Jesus Christ, God-Come-To-Us-In-Human-Form, reacts with true sensitivity to the kind of thing to which he is being exposed. And the day came when He was able to confront the tax collector. And so He says to Matthew, knowing human nature as He does, and as He did, -- "Follow me." For a man was not meant to take advantage of his brothers. A man was not meant to spend his energy in anything that doesn't return what can glorify God.

I recall with a great deal of personal pleasure and profit what used to appear, and what did appear, of course, as the first question in the old Westminster Catechism in the Presbyterian Church:

-- What is the chief end of man?

-- The chief end of man, the answer was,
is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.

There's a Pauline recommendation in the New Testament: "Whatever a man does he should do to the glory of God." Here is a man who is wasting his years, and doing something that defrauded his fellow man, and surely did not glorify God. So Jesus Christ begins to breek that by appealing to the better side of a man's nature . . .

..."You're meant for something better -- you're meant to be more

productive -- you are meant to serve your fellow man rather than to defraud . . ." That's implicit in all of this. To the everlasting credit of Matthew, he responds to the challenge that comes to him by Jesus Christ.

Now having said all of this, let me go back to remind you what I said this sermon was meant to be. It's meant to be helpful to the person who is not satisfied with his present job: under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, respond perhaps to what Jesus Christ could show you, granted you have time and patience, to that field of endeavor which would enable you to have the satisfaction of knowing that in your day's work you are following Jesus Christ. It is not given to every man to leave what he's doing and become a preacher. I wouldn't recommend that. But it is given to every man to do the kind of thing, wherever his situation in life may be, that can bring honor and glory to God.

Said Martin Luther, as you have heard me say again and again, "The cobbler who repairs shoes and does a day's work that's honest, so that children as they slop around in weather such as this may be better protected . . . or as the man goes down into the pit and works in the mines, the very shoe that he wears may protect his feet - - - said Martin Luther, "The cobbler who repairs the shoes to the glory of God does work that is as sacred in the sight of God as the priest who stands before the altar with folded hands in prayer."

And you don't see much hope for them, and you think that perhaps they're locked in to where they are . . . this sermon is meant for you, my friend. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit there is always the possibility that a man could become better than he

is - - to know and to believe that Jesus Christ is coming your way, trying to draw out the better side of your nature, if only you will respond. Now you think about these things.

It's a great text, honestly . . . reminds us of a great moment in a man's life. And the net result - - to the end of time, as Matthew said, "I'll even write a book about it." And he did!

* * *

(Transcribed as recorded)

"ALL ROADS LEAD FROM JERUSALEM"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son,
Jesus Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Mike 19:1

(Sermon prefaced with recording of ringing of church
bells in Jerusalem)

. . . . That's the way it was last Sunday in Jerusalem. For that's where we were. And as we were in Jerusalem last Sunday we were thinking of you.... this Sunday the Saint Luke band of pilgrims is in Silver Spring, thinking of Jerusalem. There is no other place on earth that can possibly compare with it.

If you were to ask me as one person in particular, If you were to return to one place again and again, of all the places to which you have gone on the face of the earth, to what spot would you be naturally drawn? Quite frankly, this morning I would say to you it would be the Holy Land. For two reasons, which undoubtedly you will immediately respect. One, it is the land of my fathers. But more important than that, it's the land where it all began.... it's the land that gave us Abraham...Isaac...Jacob...Moses...Joshua...Solomon ...David...Iusus Christus -- Jesus Christ.....Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Simon Peter. Jerusalem is many things. That's where we were last Sunday.

Jerusalem is a study in sights and sounds, and smells. The sound that you just heard was the sound of the bells in the majestic tower of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Redeemer, built by Germans a number of years ago, it's in the Old City of Jerusalem. There some of us marked the path that led to that holy place last Lord's Day.

Jerusalem is many things. Wrote David Gibbon in his "Return to Jerusalem"
- - "Jerusalem's very stones breathe history. Troops still patrol the city's

narrow streets, and it seems very hard to remember a time when this was not so. For nothing is new to Jerusalem - - it has seen it all before, and it has remained soaking up the history that takes place within its walls as it always has. To many millions of people, Jerusalem, the city of David, is far more than a city. It represents to a greater extent than any other place on earth an ideal . . . "

If it can be said that a home is more than a house, then it most certainly can be said that a land is more than a place. And that is most certainly true for that part of the world which we reverently refer to as "terra sancta" - - the Holy Land.

The title for this morning's sermon: "All Roads Lead From Jerusalem" -- and the text: the 1st verse of the 19th chapter of the Gospel according to Luke:

"He (meaning Jesus) entered Jericho and was passing through . . . "

We were passing through. For that's what a pilgrim is, you know. A pilgrim is one who is on his way to a particular place and his journey is characterized by the nature of his destination.

What did we see as we passed through Jerusalem? What did we see as we passed through Jericho? Interestingly enough, when we were scheduled to leave, a week ago tomorrow morning, typical of what Jerusalem is, our schedule had to be changed, for there is unrest, and there was rioting going on in Nablus, and their agency said, "We cannot take you there today." So we altered our plan, and as God often works, the unexpected proved a special blessing -- we went by way of the old road to Jericho, and saw things that otherwise we would never have seen. But, we were passing through.

When we got to Jericho, as we had been there before, I was somewhat disappointed, frankly speaking, for none in our group got out of the bus to take a picture of the most photographed tree in Jericho. Oh, they were taking pic-

tures right and left -- there are many trees in the Holy Land -- the olive tree, of course, the cypress, the juniper, the cedar of Lebanon, the oleander, the eucalyptus . . . in Jericho there's a sycamore tree, the most photographed tree in Jericho. For there -- (you know the story -- you read it for yourself in Luke 19 (!) . . . how when Jesus was passing through He saw a man up a tree, a man by the name of Zacchaeus, who was ostracized, hated and despised by his fellow-townsmen, who wouldn't so much as give him room to stand as Jesus was passing through. But it was because of his intense desire to see this man passing through, that Stranger-come-to-town, Zacchaeus went up into the sycamore tree.....and then Jesus saw him and Jesus spoke first -- "Zacchaeus, you get yourself down, I'm going to come to your place for supper." And He went to the house of Zacchaeus -- and this Jesus who was passing through brings a transforming touch into the life of this man, and he becomes converted on the spot.

....for having exploited people, now henceforth, after having seen the Man-who-was-passing-through, he says to Jesus Christ, "If I have defrauded any man, I will return to him four-fold." ...his life was never again the same because of this Man-who-was-passing-through.

I neglected to tell you that as I reflect upon the fact that as Jerusalem is remembered because of the ideal that it represents -- I must tell you this: ideals in the abstract don't turn me on at all. Talk to me about love in the abstract, and it doesn't mean a thing to me.....but let me meet someone who loves me, and my life can be changed -- particularly when that love is a reflection of God's love -- then it becomes very real....

...don't talk to me about truth in the abstract....but let me meet a person who is truthful -- particularly when there is opportunity to be deceitful, and every bit of integrity shines through --

then the ideal of truth makes sense to me, and I can respect it.

And I myself, in turn, will want to become truthful, once I've seen a person who personifies it.

I told you that's where it all began, because out of Jerusalem, taking a road that led in many directions, here and there -- that Stranger-from-Galilee passed through Jericho, and represented God-in-the-flesh -- "In him -- " says the Apostle Paul -- "all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." He is the Eternal Pilgrim.

And we, too, were pilgrims. And as I stand at this sacred desk this morning I could tell you about the sacred sights we visited, and you would be interested, of course you would be -- to know that we had been there, and particularly if perhaps you might never be able to go there.

...it may be of some value to you to learn that the very first sacred sight we visited was the Church of the Pater Noster -- the Church of the "Our Father" -- built presumably on the very site where our Blessed Lord taught His disciples to pray. And there you can find to this day, in beautiful mosaic work, 64 different linguistic interpretations of the Lord's Prayer....

...I could tell you about going to the Garden of Gethsemane, where we stood awe-struck, as well we should have, in the shadow of those 2,000 year old olive trees under which, presumably, our Blessed Lord may have knelt to pray....

...I could tell you, of course I could, about going to the holy area, Mt. Moriah, where presumably there on that rock Abraham was willing to offer Isaac as a sacrifice . . . and the mosque, the Dome of the Rock, said to be one of the most beautiful places on earth . . .

...I could tell you about going to the Garden of Gethsemane to the Holy Sepulchre.....to the Shepherds' Fields.....

But a land is more than a place. It's what happened there that matters.

We remember the land because of the people of the land. We remember the land because of Jesus Christ -- the Eternal Pilgrim. And we, too, were pilgrims, and I ask myself the question, and this is where the burden of this sermon now will be thrust -- I, a contemporary pilgrim passing through, must ask myself the question: What did people see of Jesus Christ in my life? It is not too much to presume -- as Jesus Christ went from place to place, leaving indelibly the stamp of God upon the fabric of their soul, so much so that when He went away there were those who could reverently put their fingers to their lips and whisper the name of GOD as they had never done it before....

...so I, a latter-day pilgrim, must ask myself the question: As I pass through Jericho, as I pass through Samaria, as I pass through Galilee -- did I leave the stamp of God anywhere?

I see her face now -- she was ten years of age, absolutely adorable -- dark-haired, dark-eyed, olive-skinned -- she was the one from whom I bought the Jerusalem Post each morning, paying her far more than I should have. She told me in her English that she had been taught in school that she got up around 3:30 in the morning to make sure that she could get the papers in time to be there to sell them early to the people who left the hotel early. With whatever insight she had, with a measure of pride she said to me: "Me Baptist" -- how did she know that I had married a Baptist?

....she told me how she went to Sunday School -- her name was Deegi. I shall never see her again, in all likelihood -- what did I leave upon the fabric of her heart? I...who was passing through? . . .

I think of that Arab Christian, a man who like the Parish Vicar one day felt the claim of Jesus Christ upon his soul to become a minister of the Gospel of

Jesus Christ. He got his theological training in Finland. Now he's one of the pastors in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Redeemer, trying to minister to a band of Christians, minority in the Holy Land, where Christians all too often are simply tolerated -- the minority that they are. He gave us the Sacrament. I heard him preach in Arabic. I understood so little, if any, but I saw a man there committed to Jesus Christ, trying to carry on as best he can faithfully to his vocation....

...I ask myself the question: As I pass through, what encouragement did I give to him, he who is claimed by God? What need in his life could I have met?...I ask myself that question, a pilgrim passing through.

There was Saad, our guide, who arranged so many wonderful things for us because he felt a kinship with some of us, just because our family name was the same as his family name, and did things for us that I am sure he does not do for any other groups -- how he took us out into the wilderness and introduced us to a Bedouin shiek in his tent, and there that Bedouin shiek provided us the hospitality of the desert, who count it a great joy to share with the strangers something of his love, even though we could not understand a single word that each spoke to the other. I was passing through, and as a stranger he was hospitable --

-- what did I leave upon the fabric of his soul, in the name of Jesus Christ?

And why shouldn't I tell you this: there was a camel-driver who came to our hotel, and that little sweetheart of Saint Luke, Patty Burkness, was there, and she wanted to ride the camel.....but Saad, our guide, had said, "Don't you dare pay more than fifty cents!".....and the camel-driver said, "It's a dollar." She didn't get on.....about to lose a customer, he said to her, "Get on for free! -- get on for free!" And Patty got on for free . . the camel oomphed and oomphed and got her up -- and there she was!

....she wanted to get down.....and

he said..."Up for free - - down: one dollar!" And I have reason to believe that as I walked away I heard an Arab say, "The rascal!"...and I think there may have been the smile of God upon that person, too.

Then there was that lad who warmed the cockles of my heart as he sold his wares at the entrance of the hotel. I greeted him with the little Arabic that I knew. We became friends immediately. And he opened up his soul as I am sure he didn't open it up to many people, and told me how sad he was....and I could see the sadness in his eyes. For once, before my time, someone from the States had passed that way, another preacher, with a charming daughter - - and they had fallen in love with each other. She was the daughter of a Baptist preacher in nearby Ellicott City....and now he tells me. When I said, "I will take your greetings to her" - - but he said, "She is dead. She was killed in an automobile accident."and I was passing through. What need did I meet in his life, as he told me of his sorrow?

There was the time when we went to the Augusta Victoria Hospital on the Mount of Olives, and that Armenian gal, the staff assistant, was showing us around, with a light in her eyes, telling us how they met the need of anyone, no matter what his religion, no matter what his station in life - - how did I meet her need as I walked by her side from place to place - - what measure of encouragement did I bring to her to remain faithful -- I, a fellow pilgrim?

Make no mistake about it, in our group -- this, too, needs to be called by name.....there was Settie, the daughter of parishioners of Saint Luke congregation. She lives in North Carolina...she came along with her grandmother -- she's a third the age of her grandmother, her grandmother is 87 years of age, with a pace-maker.

...she rode a camel....she kept us all stepping...she even baked cookies in advance, knowing that she was going to be with a group of strangers and she'd like to befriend them, even as we traveled from place to place in the Holy Land....

But Settie, her granddaughter, went out of her way to give her the necessary concern and compassion as we moved throughout that journey, and I saw the stamp of God upon the fabric of her soul, because nothing, perhaps, is more precious in God's sight, when He sees one person meeting the need of another person. And that's where it began, you know - - - God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life - - - that's where it began. God, coming to earth in human form, to meet our need as He passed through.

You remember Jesus Christ not simply because He ascended to Heaven. You and I adore and regard Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour not simply because He is in Heaven now. But you and I follow Him because of the way He lived as He was passing through.

As I worshipped in that church last Sunday, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Redeemer, I thought of one of the great ones I have been privileged to meet in this world, a Lutheran pastor by the name of Ed Mohl, who when the war was going on over there actually slept in front of the altar of that church in order to claim it for the Christians -- they would take it only over his dead body, that's the kind of man he was. I remember his telling me about an interview he had with King Hussein's father, who was then King of Jordan, who is Muslim, as you know. And he said, "Your Majesty, tell me, what do you think of the Christians?"

And His Majesty said, "What do I think of the Christians? - - what do I know about these Christians? I only see them in procession through the Via Dolorosa, with their elaborate vestments, carrying their cross, swinging their incense, building their churches, chanting their prayers - - - what do I know about them?" "But," he said, I will tell you something else....once I saw a caravan coming into the city, and I sent my representative to ask 'What is the meaning

of this caravan heading toward Jerusalem?' And my man came back and he said, 'Your Majesty, these donkeys and these camels are carrying bags and boxes of clothing and food and medicine!' And I said to my servant, 'And from whom do they come?' And he said, 'I have learned that they come from the Lutherans all over the world.'" Then his Majesty said to Ed Mohl, "Now I can tell you what I think about Christians when you ask about these people -- this I can understand!"

You and I shall pass this way but once. We are pilgrims, on our way to Heaven. Heaven is our destination. Our journey through life should be characterized by our destination. His was, that Son of God. And so I greet you, my friend, as I return to this sacred desk on this Sunday, a week from that Sunday in Jerusalem, as fellow pilgrims . . .

. . . a happy band, I hope, on our way
-- never happier than when we meet the need of another.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"CERTAIN PEOPLE: MAN OF SAND, MAN OF ROCK"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son, Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

*Matthew
26:25*

Let not the title for this general series of sermons being preached for the most part from the pulpit be misleading. The title, of course, is "Certain People." It is intended to be a consideration of those who were involved in the life of Jesus Christ in different places and at different times.

You know very well, of course, that central in our preaching is always Jesus Christ. Let not the title, then, divert you and allow you to think that someone else could be more important. Whenever the preacher comes to this sacred desk, he is in duty bound by the promise that he made at the time of his ordination to exalt Jesus Christ.

But I have to be very frank with you: I can't think about Jesus Christ without thinking of certain people....just as I can't think of certain places without thinking of certain people. As an example, as I sat in the back of the Nave this morning at 8:30, and as I saw people coming through the doors and finding their seats, I very easily mused and said to myself: "If I should be removed from this place, five thousand miles away, and I were to think of Saint Luke - - would I first think of the Red Doors? - - would I first think of the architectural features of these hallowed walls? Of course not -- important as these features may be. My first recollection would be: of you...and you...and you - - as I associate each of you within the gathered company.

Likewise, when I go back to the church in my home town where I was baptized and confirmed in the Christian faith, I think of the church tower, I think of climbing the steps that led to the second story Nave, of course I do. But more importantly, I think of that godly soul who placed his hands in blessing

"CERTAIN PEOPLE: REAL VILLAIN"
(John 11: 47-57)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

"Alright -- who did it? -- stand up!"

....that's the way I recall his voice. It was the voice of the new school teacher. He was fresh from college, it was his first teaching assignment, and in that small town in which I grew up we always had a couple of bullies who waited for the new school teacher. They'd put him to the test, alright! And it wasn't long until they did. That's the day it happened.

I've forgotten the particular prank that day, but I can hear his voice: "Alright -- who did it? -- stand up!" No voice replied. And then the new teacher, rising to his full stature, simply said, "Alright -- the entire class will remain after the dismissal period."

Needless to say, I was infuriated. I hadn't been a part of it. I didn't know it was being done. Oh, I knew that it might be done, and I had an idea as to who it was who would do it. But I wasn't involved directly, and when I did have some unfortunate measure of guilt, that made me mad too, because it was my class that had to stay.

You understand, don't you? Chances are you've been involved in that kind of thing at one time or another. And we resent being involved in what we might call corporate guilt. And when that happens we look around and we try to find the culprit -- we say: "It wasn't I -- it was he!" Or when anything goes wrong and it isn't exactly as it ought to be, we know a measure of satisfaction in pointing the finger of blame at one person in particular.

To all intents and purposes, that's the exercise that you and I are going to indulge in this morning as I come to this sacred desk. For a terrible thing

had been done - - the precious Son of God was killed, crucified. And if you want to cast it in the role of a television drama, where the so-called suspects are being brought into court and the charge is being laid - -

"On Friday, in the year 29, you did pre-meditate the murder
of Jesus of Galilee . . . "

...and there in the prisoners' dock we see three people in particular. We've gotten the list down that far - - the guilty ones, we say, at least that's what we're charging them.....Pontius Pilate....Judas Iscariot.....and Joseph Caiaphas, the High Priest. . . . "How do you plead -- guilty, or not guilty?"

...Pilate begins to squirm -- the hand-washer -- quick to make all
kinds of excuses....and we're inclined to be charitable with him....
...Judas Iscariot - - we won't let him off that easy, and as long as we
can remember we continue to think of him as Judas-who-betrayed-
Him.....it was Judas who went out and did what he did...it was
Judas tho identified Jesus -- it was Judas who betrayed the Son
of Man with a kiss and we've hated him for it. And we'd be
thrilled to high heaven, undoubtedly, if the judge could say,
"We'll go no farther in the case. Judas, you're the guilty
one - - you're the real villain!"

But would I surprise you this morning if I'd tell you that I'm not so sure we ought to stop with Judas. We move on to Caiaphas, the High Priest, and I'm going to suggest to you that if you want to brand someone the real villain, I think you can build a case for Caiaphas.

Now let me read for you the text for today's sermon, written in the 11th chapter of the Gospel according to John, the 49th and 50th verses:

"But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all; you do not understand that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish . . . "

That did it, you see. That's why I say if you want to blame one person above all others -- it's risky business, you know, doing this -- there's something down deep inside of us that knows a measure of satisfaction in saying: "You're the one." Well, let's do it just for a little while -- Caiaphas, you're the real villain.

This text indicates the kind of thing that was triggered by Caiaphas -- not by anybody else. Now, Caiaphas was the high priest that year, and Caiaphas represents those who never really liked Jesus Christ. Some people liked Him instinctively, you know that. And in this series of sermons on Certain People we have been delightfully pleased with the people who were encountered by Jesus Christ like Matthew -- and as soon as he was given a chance to follow Jesus Christ he closed his book at the seat of custom and walked away, never again to return -- just like that! He fell in love with Jesus Christ. But not everybody.

...Caiaphas is numbered among those who, when he first met Jesus Christ, discovered Him to be a threat and he felt very uncomfortable about Him, and perhaps reasoned within himself. If I ever get a chance to get rid of Him, I'm going to see that it's done! . . . well, he has his chance now, in this last week in Jerusalem.

Now what was behind all this? I think there are two things. You must always read behind the scene, you see, you must always see a thing in its proper context.

Jesus Christ had brought Lazarus back from the dead, not far away, in Bethany, not far from Jerusalem. Now this really was something. And of course people began to acclaim Him for doing this. The news did spread. And Caiaphas, whose situation had been threatened by Jesus Christ, is infuriated by this -- to think that now this upstart from Galilee will have people going after Him

as they hadn't gone before. They'll be talking about this, they'll be following Him! Well, that was one thing in recent days.

And the other, of course, was when Jesus Christ went up to Jerusalem, He walked into the Temple area, and He saw something that caused that short fuse of His (and He could have one on occasion) to be ignited. The established church, the religious leaders were exploiting the innocent and the naive and the devout. They were bleeding them. They even exacted a 20% commission to have their money changed in order to have the local coin - - they exploited them when they brought their animals for the sacrifice. It was a great rip-off. And there isn't anything quite as diabolical as a religious rip-off....

....and Jesus Christ walks
in and sees this thing - - infuriated by the very wrath of God,
He drives the money-changers from the Temple.

....that, as far as Caiaphas is concerned, that did it. This is the threat to Caiaphas and all that Caiaphas represents.

Caiaphas had about 20,000 priests under him. Don't misunderstand me how I say this, I say it as circumspectly as I can - - he was the nearest thing to a pope in those days. People got to God, according to their understanding of religion, through the priests, and he was the high priest. He had great influence, and he had quite a thing going for him as long as he could control it. But now Jesus Christ becomes a threat. And so it's Caiaphas who says to the people, "Don't you see what's happening? - - You don't quite understand!"

O, I forgot to tell you that Caiaphas, if I remember correctly, got his appointment by Rome, and as a result of that he was a stool pigeon for Rome and Rome wanted to keep all of their provinces and all of their territories as peaceful, as quiet as they could, and free from revolution. No question now in Caiaphas's mind: "Jesus Christ is a revolutionary! And if he's allowed to go unchecked,

think what's going to happen -- they'll hold me responsible for allowing it to happen, and if Rome gets fed up with us as a Jewish nation, they can destroy us -- just because of this upstart from Galilee!"

....so that's why Caiaphas comes now and says to the people round about him, lighting his own short fuse -- "You don't understand, you people! You don't realize what's at stake! It's expedient that this man should die -- he's got to go!"

(the New English Bible says, "It's in our best interests that this man should die . . ")

Now that's why I call Caiaphas the real villain, because he's the one who triggered all of this. He's the one who set the thoughts in the other people's minds: -- "We've got to get rid of him -- now! -- and finding a way by which it can be done -- because he's interfering with our own interests. Think what's going to happen to us if he remains unchecked!"

Well, I think I should tell you that it's easy for us to think and to talk this way, of course it is. And I have asked you to indulge in it for only a little while. You can't blame just one person. The world of Christendom is trying to apologize in recent years to the Jewish people for allowing boys and girls in Sunday School to grow up saying, "Well the Jews crucified Jesus." It was sin that was left unchecked in human hearts that crucified Jesus, and the sins that characterized those people in that day are sins that are not strangers to you and to me. Any man who searches his own heart knows very well that much that you and I do in this world we do because it serves our interests. There are certain things that we clamor to have curbed, only when I am affected -- any number of things may go on unchecked, but let them affect my interest, and I am willing to become involved. So in a certain sense the sin of Caiaphas is the sin of every single one of us.

It's not easy for me to tell you this, but I look back now and think of those school days when I was a youngster, and Clyde Buntz was the bully in my class-room -- why didn't I speak up to Clyde? I didn't try to dissuade him from doing that terrible prank on the new teacher -- I was afraid to! I knew what he could do to me. It is in my best interests to keep my mouth shut: as homespun an illustration as I can give you.

When I went to Europe not long after World War II, I saw the devastation -- I saw the ruins that remained after the conflagration which was Europe. I was in Warsaw and walked around where I could hardly see two bricks stuck together, where the Nazis had annihilated the Jewish quarters. I saw the evidence of the war crimes trials in Nuremberg, of six million Jews being put to death in concentration camps. I saw that. And I talked with certain pastors of our church in Germany, and I am troubled to this very day: Would I have been a Martin Niemöller who spoke out against Adolph Hitler?....Would I have been a Bishop Bergrav in Norway, who stood his ground against the occupying Nazis? Or would I have said, "It's in the best interest of my family and me to keep my mouth shut."? Any man who reasons like that walks hand in hand with the villain who speaks up. And that's something to think about.

But wouldn't it be a terrible thing if I closed the sermon at this point? Of course we're all sinners! Every single one of us is not as faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ as he ought to be. But thanks be to God, there are two kinds of sinners:

-- there's that other kind, I ought to say -- sinners, I dare say, like us, who are truly contrite for our sins and hate the thought of them, and turn to God in pure contrition and say: "Have mercy! . . . Have mercy! . . . "

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"CERTAIN PEOPLE: GOOD START, BAD FINISH"

GRACE, Mercy and peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

John 6:70-71

You know, of course you do, what we're doing these Sundays, we're considering certain people who were involved in the life of our Blessed Lord. In fact the sermon series bears that general title: "CERTAIN PEOPLE" - - and then each Sunday a specific person. During Lent we're talking about those people in particular who were involved with the last stage in the pilgrimage of our Blessed Lord.

Today there's a sub-title as we think of Judas Escariot - - "CERTAIN PEOPLE: GOOD START, BAD FINISH" - - and the text, the 70th and 71st verses of the 6th chapter of the Gospel according to John:

"And Jesus answered them, Did I not
choose the twelve of you? Yet one
of you is a devil . . ."

He was talking about Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, for Judas, even though he was one of the twelve disciples, was going to betray him. Let's begin by putting it this way: no one, so it would seem, ever questioned the stock from which he stemmed, and he hailed originally from a good area. His home town region had produced a remarkable prophet, that man Amos -- (he was quite a preacher, you know -- you'll find extracts of his sermon in the book that carries his name in the Old Testament) - - - came from those parts.

His parents had high hopes for him. That's why they named him as they did - - they called him Judas. And Judas means 'Praise of God' . . . and presumably had they been living when Jesus chose Judas as a disciple, they

they must have been very, very gratified. Their son had come a long way.... but the finish was sad, sordid, sinister - - good start -- bad finish. Something went wrong.

There is always that possibility. And that is the lesson you and I learn from a man such as Judas - - good start.....there's always the possibility of something going wrong before the end is completed -- good start, bad finish.

I've quite forgotten his name but I do remember reading about him - - he was a distinguished personage, and because his reputation had been so established an enterprising author came to him and offered to do his biography -- he felt the man owed it to society to have his life recorded, and while he was still living. But this distinguished personage refused. The author pleaded with him...he continued to refuse. The author pressed him for an answer, and the answer was given forthrightly: "I've seen too many men in my day fizzle out at the end, fall flat on their face, succumb to temptation. I don't know what my story could be."

...well, you understand, don't you. Good start - - always
the possibility of something going wrong, a bad finish.

I don't listen to too much television, I do try to be selective. In recent years what I prized especially was that interesting thing done by Steve Allen when he corralled characters from the past and brought them on the scene and then interviewed them - - how they talked back and forth to one another around the table, as though he was challenging them to defend their place in history, or giving them a chance to react as to how they'd been labeled by history. You may remember some of them - - Cleopatra, Marc Anthony, Charles Darwin, Theodore Roosevelt, Abdulla the Hun - - - - I thought it very interesting.

And that leads me to say to you, suppose it were possible for us to do that right now, and you and I were holding court with some of the disciples and

today it is Judas Iscariot, and we make perfectly plain to Judas that we understand how history has dealt with him -- "Now Judas, how do you respond to it -- come on, Judas, you can be free with us, lay bare your soul! The question is, Judas, why did you do what you did? To the end of time you'll be recorded as the betrayer -- now why did you betray your Master?"

I suppose we could be doing this for several reasons, and as we do it we could say, "Relax, Judas, because you're among friends and we're looking upon you with a charitable disposition. We're Christians, and we follow in the footsteps of one who forgives, and even on the cross He had you in mind, presumably, had you been living, when He said, 'Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they do' . . . well now, we're charitable, Judas, you can relax, lay bare your soul, tell it to us just as you see it -- don't hold back anything!"

....well, maybe we could have talked to him like that....

But on the other hand we could have encouraged him to relax, and to be at ease with us by saying, -- "This terrible thing," we could say very easily,

" . . is part of a generation. Well, we all make mistakes, Judas -- we're a generation of tolerant people -- we live in a time when anything goes, and nobody's shocked any more -- we're not shocked, Judas -- we don't even sit in judgment on you even if we were inclined to do it. It's not because we're unusually forgiving -- it's just that we're tolerant -- go ahead, Judas! "

Wouldn't it be terrible if some of us encouraged him to speak from that stance, as though we're not troubled at all by what happened -- we're just that tolerant of evil, we're just not going to be shocked by it -- "Go ahead, Judas!"

Well, for whatever reason, we've encouraged Judas to speak, and we press the

point: "Now Judas, why did you do it?"

And then we're surprised as Judas speaks up, and he says, "I don't know."
"Now why are you shocked?" Judas says to us, "when I tell you I don't know why? Haven't you ever been in that position? Haven't you ever done something that you have been ashamed of, and then upon reflection you've looked back and you tried to figure out why you did it, and you can't quite figure it out. I have my moments," says Judas, "when I'm like that. I know what I did, and I don't know why I did it! I know what the Master said, He said I was a devil, He said I was an instrument of evil - - and that's what I was. But how I got that way I don't know - - I . . . I just did it."

...and there isn't a single one of us
who doesn't understand Judas when he talks like that. For every
single one of us, upon reflection, looks back across his life
and knows there are certain chapters would to God he could erase.
And you and I have our moments when we have to admit the Devil
got into us and we did it.

Easily said, isn't it? Excuses us. But we still have to reckon with a
God who says there's such a thing as personal responsibility. The Devil doesn't
force his way into any man's soul.

Presumably the Devil was asked one time, "How did you get into her heart? --
how did you get into her soul?" His answer was simple: "She left the door
ajar." There is such a thing as personal responsibility.

So Judas, we can't let you off the hook as easily as you'd like to be let
off, nor shall we excuse ourselves as easily as we wish we could. "Judas, why
did you do it?" Well, he's in a talkative mood: "I don't know exactly why, I
told you, and sometimes I try to figure it out, and I've come to this conclusion,
that maybe there were a number of reasons - - take this one as an example: I
never felt I was an insider - - I always felt I was an outsider."

"Jesus called twelve of us. But I never felt I had it made as far as the disciple group was concerned. I'll tell you why," says Judas, "Remember you talk so easily about - - 'and then Jesus took with him Peter, James and John - 'you know something -- never once did the Master look at me the way He looked at Peter, James and John - - never once did He give me a chance to be part of a privileged few! How I wish He had! I felt like an outsider . . . "

" . . . and I'll tell you something else, it got to me eventually - - never once did Peter, James or John come to me and say, 'Judas, I know you weren't with us, and I suppose the Master had His reasons, but we wish you could have been along, Judas - - take that experience on the Mount of Transfiguration -- it was out of this world! -- Judas, let me tell you about it . . . '" Judas says, "Peter never came to me like that....John never came to me like that.... ..James never came to me like that. Psychologically, I guess, it did something. I felt an outsider."

" . . . and also, you know, the rest of them -- where did Jesus get them? He got them up there in Galilee around the Sea of Tiberias, that's where He got them. I didn't belong to those people up there. My roots are down here in Judea. I felt like an outsider, I never had it made with Him, or with them . . . " Maybe that could have been the reason. Psychologically, you can appreciate it, can't you? You could identify with Judas on that score?

When a man brands himself an outsider, it does something to his personality, and eventually it does something to his demeanor as well as his practice.

And then we are stunned a bit in silence, nobody says anything much for a while, when we look at him again and say: "Is that all you have to say, Judas?" And then Judas says, "Well, maybe there's another reason, and I don't know what you're going to make of this."

" . . . but you know, I did believe in Him. That's why I responded. Look at it this way - - for 500 years our people were held under the yoke of the oppressors, and through all these years we were rooted and grounded in Scriptures and told that some day the Messiah would come -- we lived on the basis of our hope. And then one day He came, and I looked at Him and He looked at me, and He said, "This is it," and I responded to Him as I've never responded to any other person. I said, I am going to follow Him because I believe in Him. I thought He was the promised Messiah. I would dream at night that one of these days He'd drive the enemy into the sea and He'd establish our Kingdom right here on earth. Every now and then He'd give me reason to believe that He was about this sort of thing but lately . . . "

...now Judas refers to the last chapter in the life of Jesus....

" . . . lately it occurred to me that He spent an awful lot of His time in recruiting His army -- not getting troops -- but He spent a lot of His time with just this person and that person -- I thought He was wasting a lot of precious time just on individuals . . . "

" . . . and not only that, as you know, as He came to the end of His pilgrimage, He talked a lot about dying on a cross -- and then it hit me right between the eyes, and I said, is that the way it's going to end? - - and I gave my life for this sort of thing? Why, it's going to fail! It's going to flop! This isn't for me, and I'll try to find a way out, and maybe I can find a way out by forcing His hand -- one last chance -- I'll force His hand, I'll put Him in a position where when the Roman soldiers come He'll cry for the legions of Heaven and they'll come just like that! - - "...maybe that's

the way he reasoned . . . Judas says, "That's the way it occurred to me! -- I think it did! Whether it commands respect in your eyes or not, I don't know, but that's the way I've sized it up . . . "

Little, of course, did Judas realize that you can't force God's hand. Little did Judas realize that you can't at will get Jesus Christ to jump through the hoop just because you think that's what ought to be done at that particular time. God doesn't play according to our schedule, nor according to our method. And Judas had his ideas, and Jesus had His . . .

"Well," Judas says, "maybe that's why I did it." And some people think -- you know this is only speculation -- and what else can you do, you can't do anything else but speculate when you don't know why -- you really can't settle completely by saying he did it for the 30 pieces of silver. There's much more to it, I believe, than that.

And then, I think I have to tell you this, I can hear Judas say,

"Maybe there's another reason why I did it. I got tired of trying to be good and not seeing much of a return on my investment. The longer I stuck with Him, the fewer recruits we got. Oh, for a while it looked great! But in the end I could see the tide turning against Him. When I was trying to be good all the time, I was trying to be honest, I was trying to be decent, I was trying to be loving, I was trying to be faithful to Him. And when I saw that it wasn't going to turn out as well as I thought it should have, frankly I just gave up! I got tired of being good! I got tired of making the investment. And when I gave up, well I suppose that's how Satan got into me. I no longer tried, I no longer cared. I gave up. And how it happened to take the shape it did in the betrayal, I don't know -- but this is the rationale behind my having done what I did."

Now let me say to you with all the strength that my soul can command, let this sermon be as relevant as it can be. For any number of you people whom I love and respect in the Lord -- you get tired, and I get tired of

trying to be good, and not always seeing a return. I like to think that I'm nobly intentioned, I like to think that I'm giving my energy to serving the Lord, and there are times when I'd like to see a much better return. You do, too. Be careful of the temptation to give up and say it isn't worth it. And for those of you who are parents, you're investing so much of your time and your love in your kids - - - and every now and then you don't get the return that you think you ought to get and you are about to give up, for God's sake, don't give up!

And that's the way this sermon's going to end -- not to talk to you about Judas - - Jesus Christ remains central in all of our discussion -- when you talk about certain people, you talk about certain people in their relationship to Jesus Christ - - - the startling thing about Judas, the drama which is Judas, the startling thing isn't that Judas betrayed . . . the mind-boggling thing is that Jesus Christ, knowing the kind of character that Judas was, never gave up on him.....never loved him one whit less than He did any of the others. Now that's something to think about, isn't it?

Love so amazing, so divine, demands a response on my part, and yours as well. It's as wonderful as all that! And maybe that's the lesson we need to learn from what happened in the life of the betrayer. . . .

" Our Lord Jesus Christ in the night in which he was
betrayed, took bread and blessed it and broke it, and
gave it . . . "to Peter, James, John, Nathanael.....and
to Judas.

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"NOT TO TAKE CHRIST SERIOUSLY"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

25.1-9
Lubi

We continue today our sermon series on the general theme of "Certain People," and particularly during Lent those people who were involved in the final chapter of our Blessed Lord. Today the character who commands our consideration is a man named Herod.

Now you very properly could ask -- which one, please? For as some of you know, there were two Herods involved in the life of our Blessed Lord. The fact that some of you might ask "Which one?" and some of you who might wonder why the question had to be raised at all, allow me to make an incidental observation as I come to the sacred desk this morning. I have been wont to do that sometimes, you know, before the sermon is about to be preached, to make an incidental observation . . . let me do it.

In some of my readings these days I am discovering that there are people who lament the fact that many folks who come to church these days do not have a familiarity with the Scriptures. There was a day, perhaps several generations ago, that when people came to church, they came carrying with them their Bibles. They wouldn't possibly think of leaving home without also reaching for the copy of the Scriptures . . . and when the Lessons were being read, even as Dr. Redington read the Lessons today, the entire congregation would reach for the Scriptures and follow very carefully.

...I remember visiting in Westminster Chapel in London, and one of the things that pleased me very much was to see that in the pews there were the book racks. and in addition to having space for the hymnals, they also had ample space for the Holy Bible, and alongside of the hymn books a suf-

ficient supply of the Scriptures for each person to follow.

Sometimes when I travel around the country and I'm invited to preach in certain churches, I have discovered -- not very often -- but I've discovered occasionally, when I am about to preach and announce the text, very naturally people reach for their Bibles -- open their Bibles and follow. I wish that could be true for Saint Luke.

Now let's get back to what I said at the beginning. I want to talk to you about Herod. Which one? Some of you don't know. There were two, you know -- a father and a son. And both of them were involved in the life of our Blessed Lord.

Well, to help all of us, who are not going to have much of an appreciation for this sermon if you don't get it in the proper context -- so, figuratively speaking, let's reach for our Bibles now and let me read for you from the 23rd chapter of the Gospel according to Luke:

" . . . and the whole multitude of them arose and led him (that means Jesus) unto Pilate, and they began to accuse him saying, We found this fellow perverting the nation and forbidding to give tribute to Caesar, saying that he himself is Christ the King.

And Pilate asked him, saying, art thou the King of the Jews" And he answered him, and said, 'Thou sayest it.'

Then said Pilate to the chief priests and the people, I find no fault in this man. And they were the more fierce, saying, He stirs up the people teaching throughout all Judea, beginning in Galilee to this place.

When Pilate heard of Galilee, he asked whether the man were a Galilean.

And as soon as he knew that he belonged unto Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him to Herod, who himself also was at Jerusalem at that time.

And when Herod saw Jesus, he was exceeding glad: for he was desirous to see him of a long season, because he had heard many things of him; and he hoped to have seen some miracle done by him.

Then he questioned with him in many words, but Jesus answered him nothing."

Now this last verse is the text: "And Jesus answered him nothing." He gave him the silent treatment.

You know what the silent treatment is, don't you? It can be absolutely devastating. Some of you may immediately recall how you've received the silent treatment, and in recalling, you can remember how you might have screamed at the person and said: "Well speak to me! Say something! -- can't you defend yourself? Are you treating me like a non-person? I am not to be ignored -- say something!" . . . if it's the one thing that some of us can't take, it's to be scorned by silence.

Jesus Christ every now and then would give people the silent treatment -- honestly He would. I don't know what image you have of Jesus Christ, but I can tell you now that you'd better include that one. You can read for yourself on an occasional page of Scripture how: "He answered not a word . . . " He gave Pilate the silent treatment.

...one day a woman came to Him pleading for a miracle....and for a while He gave her the silent treatment.....

...Herod, whom we're considering now, got the silent treatment, and scornfully so, and deliberately so.

For I am about to suggest to you that the very integrity of Jesus Christ was at stake. And to be faithful to Himself and all that He represented in God's name, He could do no less than give Herod the silent treatment. And you'll understand why if patiently now you listen to me.

You've got to know the kind of a character that Herod was. He was far from exemplary. Let me introduce you very quickly to a chapter in his life.

....he was half-drunk....he was being delighted by a belly-dancer who was turning him on -- so much so that he lost all sense of reason, made a fool of himself . . . which can very easily happen when you're half-drunk and inflamed by passion....and he said he'd give this woman - - "Well, you ask! You'll get it!"

....and she asked for the head of John the Baptist, and she got it. That's the kind of man Herod was. And Jesus knew what Herod had done and Jesus knew the kind of man that Herod was.

Now you know what Jesus thought of John the Baptist, don't you? He said a perfectly wonderful thing about John the Baptist, held him in high regard, and I dare say loved him dearly. The Baptist was the man who prepared the way for Jesus Christ, the one person on the face of the earth, aside from His mother Mary, who had done for Him what nobody else could have done. As far as the Kingdom was concerned, he was the forerunner....

...and if you have ever been engaged in some noble worthy endeavor and have been able to realize that out here in this great big wicked world there's at least one person who is on the same wave-length as you are, who is as committed, within the limitations at hand, as you are, you know how you feel toward that person....

That's the way Jesus felt about John the Baptist.

Now can you understand how He felt about Herod? Half-drunk, inflamed by passion, he'd allowed him to be murdered.

Not only that, you've got to recognize something else. As Jesus Christ is being brought to Herod, I can picture the courier standing there and saying to this man Herod from Galilee, "Sir, I bring you this prisoner. I bring you this prisoner from Pontius Pilate -- Pontius Pilate says he belongs in your jurisdiction -- he's in your hands now -- you deal with him!"..... that's what Pontius Pilate said. Jesus Christ was perfectly aware that this was happening. He labeled in his own mind, undoubtedly, how Pontius Pilate was a buck-passer, and being able to read the mind of Herod, He knew very well that Herod was going to be a buck-passer . . . and here Jesus Christ was being shuttled back and forth, back and forth. From a human perspective, can you understand now what's going through the mind of Jesus Christ?

And then when Herod does receive Jesus Christ, he has some degree of fascination in Him because he's heard about this performance of miracles -- wherever Jesus went He performed miracles, his curiosity, is getting the better of him. And I suppose Jesus Christ, who was bent on doing God's will and treating people with compassion would become irritated by people who just wanted miracles to be performed. And Jesus Christ just isn't about to jump through the hoops because somebody says, "Perform a miracle! -- perform a miracle - - perform a miracle!"

...you remember, in "JESUS CHRIST, SUPERSTAR" that they would present, I dare say, Herod in quite authentic fashion, as that sensual character. And then when he sees Jesus Christ he says, "Go ahead -- walk across my swimming pool!" -- daring Him.

And then I'm half-inclined to think that if Herod had any streak of decency, it could have surfaced a bit when he saw Jesus because some people said that Jesus Christ was John-the-Baptist come back from the dead. And maybe Herod was a bit uneasy because he was being haunted, now, by the memory of the death of a good man. And in the face of that uneasiness now he gives way to dealing with Jesus Christ in a trivial way.

And that can happen sometimes, you know, when we're guilt-stricken, we do behave foolishly, and cheaply, in a trivial manner. That's one way by which I explain what I'm about to tell you now. So Herod gets his soldiers and they ridicule Jesus Christ - - "You are a prisoner, you're in chains -- miracle-worker -- release yourself from those chains! You are a miracle-worker - - ah, yes, you change water into wine, don't you? Here's a jug of water - - come on -- come on! - now! -- now! -- right now! Change it! Let me see you do it!"

. . . "What's this, you say you're a king - - you! You don't look like a king. We'll make you look like a king! . . . "

"CERTAIN PEOPLE: WHO GET OFF EASILY"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from
God our Father and from His
Son Jesus Christ, our Blessed
Lord. Amen.

The sermons for the most part being preached from this pulpit deal with the central theme of "Certain People" -- specifically during the Lenten season certain people who were caught up in that final chapter in the life of our Blessed Lord. You should know by this time that the purpose to be served in the preaching of this series is that we might relate to Christ through these people or that we might relate to the ones with which we have been dealing. Now so far during this Lenten season we've talked about Herod....we've talked about Pilate....we've talked about Caiaphas....we've talked about Judas Iscariot. How you have related to each one of them and how you have seen yourself in relationship to Christ through them I don't quite know. But I would hope most certainly that you have taken it seriously.

Now we come this morning to the character Barabbas. Let me refresh your memory: he's the prisoner who was released. He was meant to be killed, but to satisfy the mob Jesus Christ was sacrificed in his behalf.

The older one becomes the more he tries to recall what his original impression was regarding certain Biblical characters. I have been trying to do that as I have been preparing this sermon. When I first heard about Barabbas in Sunday School, how did I feel toward him? I think I can be very honest with you when I say that the feeling that I had then is pretty much the feeling that I have now: I fairly hated him.....because he got off, and Jesus had to die in his place.

I don't know how much you know about Barabbas. Really now, there's little to be known about him. In the Scriptures he doesn't say a word, he's more or less a passive person -- he's caught up in the chain of events. He gets off easily. And that's another thing, I suppose, that's been difficult for me because I've never quite been able to accept the fact that life is not always fair. And surely life was not fair in this case, when a man who was a robber, a murderer, and an insurrectionist, was allowed to go free.....and the Son of God, who went around doing good, the personification of Love, was sacrificed on Calvary's cross.

The playwrights help us, of course they do. There's a French playwright who tries to picture for us as best he could what Barabbas was like. Let me read it for you as you keep this in mind, that in every human tragedy one character seems to come out on top, not only so, but he actually benefits from the misery and suffering of all the other characters around him. Keep that in mind now as you think of Barabbas -- in every human tragedy occasionally one character comes out on top and benefits by the misery that's caused other people.

Well, this is the way the French playwright pictures Barabbas for us: --he's seen in the dungeon, waiting to be executed. He is a tough, unrepentant ruffian, who boasts of his murderous exploits and declares proudly that it took a whole battalion of soldiers to arrest him and bring him to justice.....a priest comes to the door of the dungeon and whispers that things may not turn out as badly as he expects..... Next we see him on Pilate's balcony where Caiaphas eloquently presents him to the crowd as a basically patriotic man who is more sinned against than sinning, and who deserves a better chance in life. He keeps prodding Barabbas to shed a few tears, and to put on a show of contrition, even though it doesn't mean anything.

...when the crowd votes for his freedom he sheds a few more tears and promises to be a good citizen. When he sees Jesus being led to the gallows prepared for him, he realizes that he's been cleverly used. Running toward Jesus, the playwright puts these words on his lips:

"Hey, comrade! Hey, comrade! It's not my fault!

No ill feelings? -- don't blame me!"

I find myself hating Barabbas because that's how much I love my Lord. And yet upon reflection I'm constrained to tell you that while it's clearly made for us that Barabbas should have died on the cross, he did not -- he escaped that kind of death. He was guilty, guilty of two different fronts: guilty as far as his fellow-men were concerned . . . he'd broken the moral law, he'd broken the legal code of his day -- robbery, murder, insurrection. Also, in the sight of God he was guilty, because he had treated his fellow-men in a way that's not pleasing in God's sight.

Now with all the strength that I can command I am going to suggest to you something that has not occurred to you, in all likelihood. You have related, perhaps, to Herod, to Caiaphas, to Pilate, and to Judas. But you don't find it a very easy thing

to relate to Barabbas. You're not a murderer, you're not a thief, and you haven't incited anyone to insurrection....and you've not had charges brought against you that would have condemned you to die. But hear me and hear me well: that of all the people caught up in the life of Jesus Christ in that final chapter, Barabbas is the one to whom we ought to relate, for Barabbas was the first man who could honestly say, "Jesus Christ died for me! I am the one who should be there!"

The Church teaches, and properly so, that every single one of us is a sinner. And I can envision ourselves standing in judgment before God when the road is made plain -- 'guilty'-- every single one of us, in the sight of God. I don't enjoy telling you this, and I'm not trying to put you on a guilt trip, to make you feel miserable. I am simply telling you as I believe it to be true. According to Scripture, "There is no one righteous, no, not one of us." -- branded guilty in the sight of God.

Barabbas was guilty. I hate the thought that he got off scot-free. But upon reflection, I know that I plead to my Heavenly Father to be gotten off scot-free too: "Lay not my sins to my charge!" That's not my cry alone. It's your cry, too. For none of us can stand before the Bar of Justice in the face of God himself.

So I say to you, we do relate to Barabbas, because Barabbas was the first to say, "Jesus Christ died for me." That's why we're here today, isn't it? We're the people who know that we have been died for -- we are the people who know that we have the hope of heaven because we believe that Jesus Christ took our place on that cross! That's good basic theology. If you've never gotten it before, hear it now: Every single one of us happens to be the kind of a person who can say, "He died for me!"

What happened to Barabbas after he was set free? We don't quite know. We know what happened to Judas. But what happened to Barabbas? Here again we draw on the playwright. One playwright has it that Barabbas came back after the crucifixion and was looking for the followers of Jesus -- and was absolutely infuriated when he found out that he couldn't find them. And he starts taking them to task -- what they had done to their friend. For now he realizes what Christ had done for him, He had taken his place. And Barabbas says to them, "I will speak up for Christ" -- and just as those words were upon his lips he's caught up in a riot and he's knifed in the back and he dies. And the playwright laments, as Barabbas cries out, "Jesus, you died for a cause -- you died for everybody -- you died for me. I haven't died for anyone."

Barabbas is every-man. And we may have our moments when like Barabbas we recognize how wonderful it all is. There, but for the grace of God, would I be!"

Did you ever hear about the Archbishop who was talking to some priests and was trying to impress upon them the wonder and the glory of the Atonement, the reconciliation of man with God by the sacrificial life and death of Jesus Christ. He was saying to the young priests that once there was a young man who made light of this thing of Christ's dying for another man's sins. And his buddy said, "I dare you to go to the priest and look the priest straight in the eye and say that you don't believe it, that you ridicule it." The young man took up the dare of his comrades and he went to see the priest and he made light of all of this business of the sacrificial life of Jesus Christ. The priest was wise and a good man, and he looked the young up-start straight in the eyes and he said, "I am going to ask you to do one thing. I heard you. I've tolerated your abuse. If you really mean what you're telling me, you go and stand in front of the crucifix in the church, and with a loud clear voice, say,

"Jesus Christ died for me, and I don't give a damn - - "

With whatever courage he could muster, the young man left the priest, walked to the church, faced the crucifix, and began - - -

"Jesus Christ died on the cross for me . . . "

....and broke into tears. That's how powerful the sacrificial life and death of Jesus Christ can be for those of us who, when the moment of truth comes, know that we are guilty.

I share it with you for what it may be worth. The jury brought in the verdict. The man whose case was being tried was declared "Not guilty." The man who was just declared free went to his lawyer and began to thank him profusely. And the lawyer faced him with contempt and said, "You're guilty as hell -- I don't want to even look into your face."

There comes the moment of truth when we who have sinned against God must know that we're that guilty. But like Barabbas, we can say, "He died in my place!" And that's the good news of the Christian faith!

* * * *

(transcribed as recorded)

...It's right here in Scripture . . . so they put a king's robe on him, so to speak, and dressed Him up like a king - - lampooned Him...made a fool of Him... ridiculed Him. And Jesus Christ, maintaining His integrity, answered him not a word. How could it be otherwise? How could it be otherwise?

Now, what can I say to you? I can say to you, I think as earnestly as I can, that it didn't have to be that way. Every reading of life, if we're to profit by it, should always introduce to us the precious thought that it could have been this, especially when you're dealing with some tragic element - - it might have been different. It is within the capability of man and it's within the capability of Herod to say to Jesus Christ: "Jesus, I was half-drunk - - I was inflamed by passion - - Jesus, I made a damn fool of myself -- I'm sorry!" "They tell me he was a good man! They tell me he was a friend of yours. Jesus, forgive me! Please!" . . . he might have said that.

And had he said that, Jesus would have said to him what He said to the dying thief upon the cross - - "You're forgiven." But Herod didn't ask for it. His behavior was to the contrary . . . and he got the silent treatment.

The other thing that I need to say to you is this: We can sit here very comfortably and take Herod to task for dressing up Jesus as a king, and then not taking Him seriously. I need to tell you this out of sheer love - - we have to be very, very careful -- not out of ridicule but out of reverence we're calling Jesus King. We have our moments, as we have right now, within this place where we adore Him . . . but what if an hour after we're away from this place we don't take Him seriously . . . what if on Monday - Tuesday - Wednesday - Thursday - Friday - Saturday we don't take Him seriously? Could it be that the net result would be pretty much the same? - - to ridicule Jesus and not take Him seriously! . . . to respect Jesus for a moment, and then not take Him seriously, isn't the end result the same: not to take Him seriously.

* * *

" - - AND SPEAKING OF PROOF - - "
(Acts 1:8)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

The two very adorable characters in "Fiddler On The Roof" -- Tevya and Goldie his wife - - - there is that very delightful moment when it occurs to Tevya that he has given two of his daughters in marriage not according to the custom of their family. They have been given in marriage because they have come to their father and said, "We are in love."

The custom had been, you know, in the old Jewish tradition, that the husband would be chosen, the bride would be chosen, by the parents. But now tradition is being broken -- twice for Tevya. Now Huddel makes known to her father that Perchik will be asking for her hand - - "Why?" - - - "Because I love him."Tevya is moved to confront Goldie his wife with this question of questions: "Goldie, do you love me?"

The moment of truth arrives for every one of us in one way or another, whatever may be the situation, the question remains: Do you?....or don't you? Do you believe in me?....or don't you believe in me? The moment of truth eventually arrives, whatever the situation: Do you trust me? or don't you trust me? For Tevya, quite unwittingly, and for Goldie too, the moment of truth had arrived: "Goldie, do you love me?"

Goldie's startled, of course, and asks: "Do I what?" Tevya still presses the question. And then she answers in that perfectly marvelous manner, some of you recall. And she reminds Tevya what she's done for him, and how to all intents and purposes, even though he may not articulate it, she has become the personification of response to love - - "This is what I am, this is what I have done, this is what I am to you." And then as though a great light comes into the soul of

Tevya - - "Then you love me!" There's excitement in his voice. He realizes how absolutely wonderful it really is.

Having said all of this I am constrained to ask you now as I come to the sacred desk on Easter Day - - the moment of truth has arrived for you: Do you believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, or don't you? The line is easily drawn. We either believe, or we don't believe. I wouldn't give much for anyone, if I were pressing for an answer when the line is being drawn, whatever the question may be resolved, of course: Do you, or don't you? -- if the answer came in a shilly-shally fashion, less than enthusiastic - - I'd be afraid of a person who could not answer with enthusiasm when the moment of truth arrived. Do you believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ? - - or don't you?

I could have addressed you immediately as I came to this sacred desk by making the observation that a preacher once did not so many years ago as he came and looked over an Easter congregation by simply saying to them: "You are here today for either one of two reasons: either because you believe in Easter, or because you wish that you could." Do you believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ? - - do you or don't you? We're here, of course we are, because we're the children of those who did believe, and by their enthusiasm they have passed it on to us.

And that's the way it began, you know. What was the most exciting thing about the early Church? - - disciples running hither and yon, confronting this person and that person, and telling them something about Jesus Christ. And what were they telling about Jesus Christ? - - -

- - not that once upon a time there was a man who was born

in Bethlehem....period.

- - not once upon a time there was a boy who grew up in Nazareth....period.

- - not once upon a time there was a carpenter's apprentice who became
a preacher, who performed all kinds of miracles....period.

- - not once upon a time there was the Son of God who came to earth,

suffered under Pontius Pilate, He was crucified, He died,
and they buried Him . . . period.

That isn't what they told people. But leaping -- and with a light in their eyes and a song in their hearts, possessed by a measure of excitement, they told about Jesus Christ who was alive, who was with them now -- a present reality. They did not talk about a Christ who was. They told about a Christ who is.

When W. Averill Harriman went to France for the first time, somebody once asked him how he was coming along with the French language, and he answered with an amused look in his eyes - - "Quite well, but I'm still having trouble with my verbs." Christians have to be very careful lest they have trouble with the verbs in their vocabulary. We must be careful lest we keep talking about a God who was, about a Jesus Christ who was. That's something different than a God who is and the Christ who is alive in the very present moment.

Christians are people who believe in a God that's still around, that He's still in business, and that He's always up to something absolutely wonderful and sublime.

There was a creative Sunday School teacher one time who thought she'd test the experience of her boys and girls and so she put on the chalk-board two words, and she said, "Now your assignment: you finish this sentence." And the two words she put on the chalk-board were these: GOD IS

. . . and one youngster, far more astute than perhaps he permitted himself to believe, simply went up to the chalk-board and put a period after the second word. For him that was the tremendous truth - - GOD IS. And that's the message of Easter. These early Christians went hither and yon, measured by the excitement that knew no ending, to tell people that Jesus Christ is alive.

You want proof for it, don't you? I'd be less than honest if I did not tell you that four times I've gone to Jerusalem, four times I've walked the Nablus

Road to that Damascus Gate, in the Old City . . . four times I've ducked inside that enclosure to walk into the garden where they will show you, to all intents and purposes, the tomb where the body of Jesus was laid. Four times I have been there, and never once did it send me - - never once did it turn me on.

Is it because I lack faith? No. I'd like to think it's because of the measure of my faith. I don't have to stand in a certain spot and look at a place that's made empty. That isn't the proof that sends me, that isn't the proof that turns me on for Jesus Christ. Press me - - what is the proof? The very proof that Jesus Christ had in mind - - He knew the power that would come in His resurrection, and He simply said to His disciples: "Now you shall be my witnesses - - you will be Exhibit A.....you will be the evidence, you will be the certitude of the resurrection . . . you will be proof positive that I am alive!"

As I stand among you now I give thanks to God for those who have allowed me to believe in the reality of Jesus Christ. I pay tribute to that godly man, the pastor who baptized me and laid holy hands in blessing upon my head and named me for Jesus Christ. He was witness to the fact that Jesus Christ is alive in this world . . .

...when I head for the hills of home, like as not I find myself standing occasionally at the grave of my parents, on that hill overlooking the town in which I grew up as a lad. I stand there for two reasons: first, to remind me that I, too, one day shall be as they now are -- the mortality of the flesh - - I, too, shall end my earthly pilgrimage. But above and beyond that I stand there to pay tribute to them, the two people more so than anyone else on the face of this earth who first taught me to believe in Jesus Christ, and indelibly marked upon the fabric of my soul the reality of Jesus. You press me for proof - - I show you my parents -- this is Exhibit A -- Jesus Christ was alive in their hearts and in their souls.

So it was for Goldie . . . when Tevya presses her the point: "Do you love me? - - or don't you?" She responds by giving evidence of how love was personified by all that she was. The proof that Jesus Christ is alive is to be found in men and women who bear testimony to that fact - - in this world.

George Buttrick in one of his writings tells about the people who live in New York City, some of whom never get to see the country-side. How do they know what it's like beyond the pavements of Manhattan? Every now and then, he says, a vendor sets up his flower cart, and there in the midst of Manhattan and those paved streets there's a man with a flower in his hand -- proof positive that beyond the pavements and the ugliness of the city flowers can grow. I have met people like that - - in this ugly world of ours -- whose life is aglow with the beauty of Jesus Christ.

Now I must remind you as I've told you before . . . he wanted to be a missionary for Jesus Christ, and the Home Board sent him out, but he never reached his destination, he was ship-wrecked. Stranded, he came to an island. Nonetheless he fulfilled his obligation to Christ and lived among those people as a messenger of Jesus Christ. The Home Board lost touch with him, they never knew what happened to him.....

....years afterward they commissioned another man, who said: "Here's this island, we presume no one has ever gone there -- you go to this island." And the second missionary came out to the very place where this man had been stranded, who had lived and died. And the new missionary comes and tells them about Jesus Christ....and the natives respond with a look of recognition - - the new missionary is confounded because they say, "We know all about him!" And the new missionary says, "No, I'm telling you about him for the first time -- you can't know about him." . . . "Yes, we know all about him, he used to live here." And that was their reference to that man who came and lived among them as Jesus Christ.

A fitting epitaph for that man could have been:

"Before he came to us, there was no light;
After he went away there was no darkness."

I have met people like that . . . and that's why I believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

* * * *

(Transcribed as recorded)

"CERTAIN PEOPLE: THOMAS, LOYAL DOUBTER"
(John 11:16)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

I'm not so sure that the paragraph that appears in this week's MESSENGER was written as deliberately as it appears, as far as the reference to the sermon is concerned. You can read it for yourself -- it also appears in the bulletin that you have in your hand -- "the sermon today on this Sunday following Easter deals very naturally with Thomas, the Doubter." . . . it deals very naturally with Thomas, the Doubter --

The implication is readily evident, isn't it? The resurrection was established, the grave was empty, the messenger of the Lord said to those who came: "He is not here!" . . . and then very quickly there followed the evidence of the resurrection -- He appeared, to this person, to that person, and to the cluster of the disciples themselves. One of them, however, was not present. Again the reference is made: "But Thomas . . ." -- or -- "Now Thomas . . ." -- as though he's in a class all by himself -- "...was not there."

Anyone who has read the Good Book at all knows what Thomas is dubbed -- the Doubter. And wherever Christians will gather, even to the end of time, when they talk about the twelve disciples -- Judas who betrayed...Peter who denied...and Thomas, who doubted.

Some of us have been pretty hard on Thomas across the years, and I'm numbered among them. In the impressionable days of my youth I did not fully appreciate him. My make-up is such, by temperament and disposition, that I'm quick to believe what sounds like a good and reasonable thing, I'm naturally drawn toward the positive. And when I read for myself and when I was taught in Sunday School that here was a group of disciples absolutely overjoyed in the resurrection of Christ....and as they

were sharing that joy among themselves, here comes a man who is going to be a damper on it, who says "I don't believe."

...I even read for the Scripture for myself, and it was hard for me to accept: "Unless such-and-such a thing occurs, I'm not going to believe. You can keep it! You can think the way you think"that was the implication . . . "but as far as I'm concerned, I'm willing to stay on the outside."

I've always had my difficulties with people who were very content to stay on the outside. I suppose God had that in mind when He called me to be a pastor, because any pastor worth his salt has to have a concern for people who want to stay on the outside, who are quite content to remain on the periphery - - as you know, I've said it repeatedly, there are some things that God reserves in a very special way only for those who find themselves within the gathered company. So I've given Thomas a rough time across the years because he was quite content to separate himself and to say to the others, "You may keep it - - you may have it - - you may believe it.....but I don't."

And I make an apology now to Thomas in your presence, a late one, of course. I've come to admire him a great deal. And if the years have taught me anything, it is subscription to the fact that, as someone once put it: "There is more faith in an honest doubt than maybe half the creeds confess." That may be an exaggeration, but there is something to be said for the man who is honest, who also happens to be a doubter.

Not all of us are so made that we can respond in the same way at the same time to the same thing. Some of us are victimized by our temperament and our dispositionsome of us do not easily respond. And as those disciples were different, one from another, there was one unifying force, however, and that was the claim that Jesus Christ had upon them, and His desire to stick with them, and to respond to them, and to accept them where they happened to be. And whenever you think about

Thomas and you pursue his life, chapter after chapter, you will discover that in the background, and gloriously so, is Jesus Christ accepting Thomas as he was - - and because he was dealing with an honest man. As long as doubt is honest, we can afford to be patient.

I think this is one thing that can be said about the generation of which we are a part. There are any number of people who doubt the Christian faith, for any number of reasons, I presume. And there are any number of people who doubt the fact of God, for a variety of reasons, I would also accept. There are people who doubt the meaning of life, there are people who doubt that we can have any relationship with God or that God can have any relationship with us. As long as they are honest, don't ever sell them short. Among the great joys that I have known in the ministry has been the joy of seeing patience rewarded as you have dealt with people who have been very honest.

It's easy for us at the stage of the game, you see, as far as we are removed from the original Christian experience - - that is, as far as the disciples are concerned -- to accept. But there are some people who haven't reached that level. Now, to bring it in sharper focus for you, I'm going to do something very boldly and very bluntly.....

"And if a sleeping child now lay
Within a manger filled with hay,
Would you believe? - - would you obey?"

Let me put it for you this way: with the gift of a sanctified imagination, imagine yourself talking to Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus Christ - -

"Tell me, Joseph, how was it when you had Jesus as a boy?"
...how would Joseph respond - - with the gift, now, of an imagination, sanctified at that? You'll not find it in Scripture, I'm willing to believe that Joseph could have said, "He was a good boy, but I had my moments when I wondered about him. As an example, there was the time when we went to visit in Jerusalem. I simply assumed that he'd always

show up every night. But he didn't. and when I discovered he wasn't with the company, I was absolutely overwhelmed - - I couldn't quite figure it out. Here he was with the learned ones -- asking them questions, holding his own! It gave me serious pause . . . "

...I think I could hear Joseph say that.

Now maybe you won't go that far, but maybe Joseph would say to us, "I always felt a bit comfortable when I had him in the carpenter shop, when I had him right there in front of me, when I could keep his time occupied, for there was always that far-away look in his eyes . . . " What am I suggesting? Even Joseph may have had his moments when he wondered -- if you can't call it doubt -- when he wondered.

"Mary, tell us about your Child - - - "

...using the gift of a sanctified imagination, now, Mary might say:

"He was different. The others . . . but Jesus! I'd hear Him stirring early in the morning, long before the others got awake....I'd hear Him going out of the house. He'd come back only when the sun was high in the sky, and I'd say to Him, 'Jesus, where were you?'

--- 'Up on yonder hill, Mother.'

---'What were you doing there, Jesus?'

--- 'What was I doing? -- talking with my Heavenly Father' .."

....it gave her pause. Small wonder that the Scriptures say that "Mary pondered all these things."

The village rabbi: "You had Him in school, Rabbi. What was He like?"

"He was different - - always wanting to see the sacred writings! - - always asking questions! -- always probing!
-- sometimes I wondered . . . "

"James -- you were His brother -- what was He like?"

"Well, after my father died we shared responsibility for the business. I wanted to branch out. He was so very content -- 'We're making a living, aren't we? We're doing an honest day's work'....and then the surprise that came when He said He wanted to give up carpentry, He wanted to be a preacher. But He wasn't like any of the other rabbis. ...I used to wonder . . . "

Suppose you had been Joseph, suppose you had been Mary, suppose you had been the village rabbi? . . . suppose you had been his brother James? Would you always have believed? Would you always have gone up and put your arm around His shoulder and looked down deep into His eyes, with complete faith and trust? -- and what is more, commitment to Him and all that He represented? Thomas was one of the Twelve, and he had his moments when he wondered. But read the record for yourself, Thomas was loyal to Him, Thomas was the one who said, "If we must go with Him, we will even die with Him" - - - that was Thomas.

Thomas was the one who when in the presence of Jesus Christ, heard Jesus Christ say something that he couldn't quite figure out, and Thomas is the one who said, "But tell us more - - we don't know what you're talking about and we don't know where you're going, but we'd like to go with you."

...Thomas was the one who said the sublime ascription of faith: "My Lord and my God!"

Thomas, I salute you, an honest man. You doubted, but yours was an honest doubt. And Jesus knew it, and dealt patiently with him.

And what's the application now for you and me? Be patient with those who haven't quite reached the level that you and I may have reached. And as long as they are honest, be patient. I'm willing to suggest to you that perhaps -- strangely put now -- one of the most gracious things that Jesus ever did was to be patient with Thomas.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"CERTAIN PEOPLE: THE GOOD AND THE UPRIGHT"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Matthew 7:57

When last October it was announced the series of sermons for the most part to be preached from the Saint Luke pulpit from then until spring would be upon the general theme of "Certain People" who were related specifically to our Blessed Lord, I don't know how many of you began to check off in your own mind just who these people might be. But I'm reasonably certain that very few, if any of you, might have included the one who is the subject for our conversation in this sermon.

He's mentioned in the Bible by each of the Gospel writers, receiving no more than five verses, but nonetheless he's mentioned. We have no record of anything that he said specifically, he's not remembered for what he said.

Some people are remembered for what they said. Some people are remembered for what they did. Don't shy away from the fact that some people are remembered for certain words that they spoke. Some of us have had our lives changed because at a critical period in our lives there were those who came to us and said something that even to this day holds us in good stead.

Any nation remembers certain spokesmen who had a way with words, who could phrase the perfect thought and capture the imaginations of a people. Words are important, and some people are remembered for what they said.

Some people are remembered not for what they said but for what they did. The stage of life has been set, the curtains have been drawn, and the moment for their appearing has come. And when they had to perform by doing something they did it superbly. The one who is the subject for today's sermon is remembered not for what he said, but for what he did. His name: Joseph of Arimathea;

and the text: the 57th verse of the 27th chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew:

"When evening fell, Joseph, a wealthy man from Arimathea, who was himself a disciple of Jesus, went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus."

And so we are introduced to a very important chapter that not everyone remembers or recognizes.

We make much of the fact that Jesus had a preaching ministry, that Jesus had a teaching ministry, that Jesus had a ministry in which He performed miracles. But Jesus had a ministry to people by which He recruited them for the Kingdom. We remember all these things about Jesus, one chapter after another. We remember especially his agony in the Garden, when the determination was made that there would be no question about it, His Father's will would be obeyed. Remember that.

We make much of the chapter of the arrest, the betrayal, the crucifixion itself. We make much of the resurrection. But how often, my friend, do you pay attention to that chapter that ought not to be ignored - - the chapter that must be included, when His body was taken down from the cross? That's when Joseph of Arimathea looms largely upon the scene.

Had he not done it - - what then? This precious body of Jesus Christ, who placed such a high value upon the bodies of others, as He emphasized His healing ministry - - that precious body of Jesus Christ would have been simply discarded, thrown into a heap along with other bodies that were not claimed, and incinerated, or left for the vultures. You can't ignore that, my friend, that's what would have happened. But then there was such a man as Joseph of Arimathea, who came forward to do an exceedingly precious thing - - to claim the body of Jesus Christ, to see that it was lowered from the cross and placed in a grave.

It was an act of courage, and you've got to remember that because I have little patience with people who when they read in the Scriptures that Joseph of Arima-

thea was a disciple of our Lord, "but secretly, for fear of the Jews" - - who so very easily brand him a coward - - that he must have had his reasons why he didn't stand up and preach as other people did. The fact remains he was still a disciple, and the fact remains that when no one else came forward, Joseph of Arimathea did. Where, now, was Andrew?.....where was Simon Peter?.....where was

Matthew?....where was Bartholomew?...where was James? Even John, the beloved disciple, who would keep the vigil at the foot of the cross - - none of these came forward to claim the body of Jesus, to keep it from being discarded, thrown away as refuse. It took an act of courage on his part to go to Pontius Pilate, to publicly make known his interest in this man who was condemned to die the death of a criminal.

Surely it was also an act of compassion, and a very precious thing indeed. I suppose my interest in Joseph of Arimathea is also quickened by the fact that one of the earliest memories that I have of my mother . . .

(and indulge me now for the moment -- it's
quite personal)

...but by this time you know and know very well that I grew up in a small town, where things done in yesteryear was somewhat different than the manner of doing things today . . . but one of the earliest recollections that I have of my mother being identified with the needs of the neighborhood was when there was a death on our street - - it was my mother who volunteered, and went to the home and bathed the body of the dead person before the undertaker arrived -- as a gracious gesture on her part, to identify with the grieving family and to do what she could. And that's the way you classify Joseph of Arimathea - - a man who was intent on doing what had to be done, and something that he knew for himself he would be able to do.

Bear with me now patiently -- you have to see it, my friend. Not very many of you will pause in the narthex and look at that reproduction of the painting of the "Descent From The Cross" -- it's done magnificently -- and it hangs just inside the narthex. Visualize it now . . . here is Joseph coming with that permit

that he's gotten from Pontius Pilate, and there are those who believe that he had to pay a sum of money to be authorized to remove the body -- that there was even a price that had to be paid.....and then he goes and hands it to the centurian and says that he's authorized to remove this body of this man hanging upon the cross. And he brings with him a fellow or two because he couldn't do it quite by himself.....

....and as he comes he sees Mary and some of the other women crying their hearts out. What's the first thing that has to be done? -- you ought to call it by name -- the nails have to be removed, the nails that had been driven into His flesh.....and there's that blood, it's a crust now, baked by the sun -- those scales have to be removed -- tenderly, you see, with due respect and devotion....and then with the help that he can muster, the limp body of Jesus is removed..... And as Joseph of Arimathea and his buddies hold the body of Jesus, their eyes fall upon Mary, the blessed mother.

In my study right nearby this pulpit that last band of pilgrims to the Holy Land gave Winifred and me a very precious thing as a token of that journey, purchased in Rome -- a little reproduction of the Pieta -- Mary the Blessed Mother holding the body of Jesus. They can't ignore her because as they take the body of Christ from the cross and see, her arms outstretched -- the very hands that cradled Him as a baby, the very hands that held Him close to her breast as she nursed Him. Her hands are outstretched.

And it's Joseph of Arimathea, of course it is, who says to his buddy, "Let her hold him once more" -- -- this, too, is part of a chapter that cannot be ignored. And all of this was done by a man who was constrained to do what had to be done and believed that he was able to do it. And then with that litter that they fashioned, or that stretcher, they take that mournful processionsome of us have walked the road from Calvary, the Nablus Road that leads to

the Damascus Gate in the Old City, and to that Garden where there was a tomb, a tomb, perhaps, that Joseph had reserved for himself. And in that place they put the body of Jesus.

For shame upon you! - - for shame upon me! How seldom I've blotted out this chapter of tenderness, and devotion -- of courage and compassion. What now can I tell you about Joseph of Arimathea beyond this? Well, he came from Arimathea. And you don't know where that is, do you? You'll not find it marked on any map, ancient or modern. There are those who believe it wasn't far from Jerusalem.

It may have been a little place - - which leads me to say to you very quickly -- don't ever deny the importance of little places, out of which there can be fashioned the noble character that history may need at a precise moment. And if you should come from a small town, a little-known place, never despair of the fact, my friend. For I thrill quite frequently when I read the biographical data of the people of this parish who have come from little-known places -- they shine among the galaxy of the saints in this Family of God which is Saint Luke Church. It's a beautiful word -- it's euphonias -- Arimathea. One has precious thoughts when he says it. So he came from this little-known place.

I should also tell you that the record maintains that he was a man of some wealth. And I need to emphasize that this morning in your midst, if you don't mind, because we Christians have a way of singing the praise of the widow-with-her-mite - - as well we should! But there also comes a time when we have to salute those who are people of some means -- who also have given to the cause of Christ. When the historian of the future writes about this Saint Luke Congregation, every now and then there ought to be a very generous chapter given to those who, having some means, have never hesitated to separate from what they have a very generous portion to be earmarked for the work of the Lord.

I can say to you with true appreciation that every significant step that this

congregation has taken within the last twenty years, there has always been this person or that person who very generously started the rest of us, and inspired us, and encouraged us. We must never forget this. The widow's mite is importantbut those who are in a position to give more than a mite are also to be recognized, as well they should be.

I should also tell you that Joseph of Arimathea was a man of some influence who did not hesitate to lean upon his influence to go to Pilate to get the body of Jesus. I'm not sure that Pilate would have released the body of Jesus to just anyone. But Joseph of Arimathea happened to be a member of the Sanhedrin, a man who was not easily ignored. And by the same token I can also tell you that he ran the risk of having his reputation suffer because now his fellow members of the Sanhedrin could say, "This is what he was really like all the time! We had some idea that he supported this man Jesus -- but as far as I'm concerned, I'll have no more dealings with this man -- to come forward in support of a man who dies in the manner of a criminal! -- Joseph of Arimathea, I never thought it of you!"

I must tell you something that you ought to know. There's a sequel to this story that's written by a member of this congregation. Not known to very many of you, in my book he was one of God's noblemen -- as grand a person as I've ever known. He used to sit just about where you're seated, Marguerita -- his name was Arnold Peter Jorgensen.

I remember him for two reasons.

He warmed my heart and gave me the necessary encouragement because once I had written in "Pages in a Diary" that I suffered a measure of chagrin that I don't know that I'd ever preached a sermon where at the conclusion of the sermon a man came forward and said, "I'd like to give my life to the Lord." And Arnold Peter Jorgensen, having read that, came forward and said, "Pastor, you'll never have to write that again." And he became a member of this parish shortly thereafter, although he was never a stranger to God's grace and God's goodness.

But more importantly, I must tell you this: he used to eat in a little-known restaurant that is down-town in the District of Columbia. Arnold was the kind of person with a universal love for mankind. He would talk to anyone anywhere. He recalled for me how he used to talk to this person, and then after a while he no longer came where they had lunch together. Arnold, I suppose, could have said, "Well the man moved away" -- he could have dismissed it from his mind. But Arnold wasn't that kind of a person. He pursued it. He went to the person at the cashier's desk and he said, "Can you tell me anything about this person who used to come in here? -- we used to have lunch together."

...and this person wracked his brain and couldn't give much of an answer.

Well, I can't fill you in with all the details but I do know that he continued to pursue it and finally Arnold discovered that the man had died. And the person where he roomed said "That's all that I can tell you -- he's no longer here, somebody said that he died -- when and where and how, I don't know." So Arnold Peter Jorgensen went to the city morgue, and discovered that the body of this man -- whose name he did not know -- was there on that slab. And he identified him.

The city authorities, according to Arnold Peter Jorgensen, tried to contact relatives and those that were contacted did not claim the body. Arnold Peter Jorgensen, with emotion in his voice, said to me, "Pastor, but he was a person!" And out of his own pocket Arnold Peter Jorgensen arranged for that man to be buried.

The world belongs to people like that. And they are the ones who are going to inherit it, who come forward and do what needs to be done, out of regard for a person.

Now in conclusion as I'm about to walk away from this sacred desk, I must tell you about an ancient superstition. I don't know how much credence you want to give it. But before I tell you I must also remind you that Joseph of Arimathea

did what he did as he responded to Jesus Christ upon the cross -- he was motivated as he recognized the sacrificial life and death of Jesus Christ to do something, and to do what he was able to do -- it was the sight of Christ upon the cross that motivated him. Now the ancient superstition is this: the old people when the church was young used to say that no one was ready to die who could not with a stick first make the sign of the cross upon the earth. And what does that mean? Only as he recognized that some day he too would return to the dust. But to the dust he would not remain forever -- because of the cross of Jesus Christ he would be given eternal life. And as he concentrated upon the fact of the cross, he recognized the amazing love of God.

And that's why to this day, as long as God gives me strength, when you bring your loved one to this place for the celebration of Eternal Life, I too will say, "May Light Perpetual shine upon him and may his soul through the mercy of God forever be in peace."

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"CERTAIN PEOPLE: WHO FOLLOW ORDERS"
(Matthew 27:54)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

As some of you know and know full well, we are no sooner finished with something in Saint Luke Church by way of event or occasion, or season in the year, until we begin to think in terms of the next year. Much of our planning is done a year in advance. As soon as this sermon series on "Certain People" is concluded, I'll be sitting down and planning the sermons to be preached from this pulpit for the most part from September until June of this fall and next spring and early summer.

Which leads me to say to you that as we recently concluded Palm Sunday, Holy Week and Easter, and as we now remain in the Easter-tide, I'm about to suggest to our Director of Dramatic Activity something that we might schedule next year. It could well be that when the Good Friday Service in the evening is concluded - - that is, you know, we have the three-hour service from 12:00 until 3:00, then for those of you who can't possibly come during the day we have the abbreviated service from 7:30 until 9:00 - - I can see it now, and I would hope that our Director of Dramatic Activity would concur . . .

It is nine o'clock. For an hour-and-a-half the congregation has been listening to the echoes of the Words from the Cross.....and as the Benediction is about to be pronounced there's an interruption -- a man suddenly stands here at the chancel steps.....he's wearing the uniform of a Roman centurian, and he says to the surprised congregation:

"But you can't go yet! You have got to hear me out! I have
something to say to you - - -"

....and to all intents and purposes it could be as dramatic as all that! And I

would hope that what he might say, then, would be to all intents and purposes the gist of the sermon that you are going to hear now.

A Roman centurian -- the man who said, in clear and unmistakable language, "Surely, I say to you, this was a righteous man!" -- or, as one translation has it: "Surely I say to you, this was the Son of God!"

.....and as Longinus would stand here

(that's the name we'll give to the Roman centurian who acknowledged Jesus Christ for what He is in the face of that crucifixion)

.....Longinus would say to us probably, make no mistake about it:

"Every now and then you'll come across someone such as I am, a person who has been victimized by his situation. It all came in the day's work, and a man is in duty bound to do what the job requires.

"I was a soldier. And one of the first things I was taught as a soldier, of course, was that an order is to be obeyed! Well, the order came through -- it was legal, alright, the trial had been held, the decision had been made, the man had to die.....hear me out.

"I'm a soldier. I don't know what you think about soldiers. Some people have crazy notions about soldiers. They think we're insensitive, they think we have no feelings, they think sometimes that we treat life cheaply....but that's not so. We can see life suddenly snuffed out -- we place a high value on life, that's why we protect it for you. I don't know if you think about soldiers . . . "

(Longinus continued)

" . . . but I am one! And I know soldiers!

"Let me tell you about that night. I am just as human as the next fellow.

It was a weekend, and I was relaxing in the barracks, and I thought to myself, wouldn't it be wonderful if this time I wouldn't have to be

subject to duty! But then they came with that order and they said the Governor had arranged for an execution, and I knew exactly what that meant - - all my dreams for a relaxed weekend were stopped immediately, because I had to answer that order. Not only that, when a centurian was in charge of an execution he had to be there to see that the fellow was put on the cross, and he had to be there until death came - - he had to see it through.

" - - well, I responded to the order, and the Governor in this case wanted to get the others to go with me -- I don't know why, but I did -- and I had the inspection at the barracks, and off we went.

"As soon as I looked at this man I said to myself, he's different. But I never realized at that moment how different I would find out that he really was. Well, every now and then when we have a victim like this we scourge them. You probably don't know what that means, you've never seen a scourging. That means we tie a fellow to a post and then we start lashing against him until his flesh is open . . it's like strands of ribbon, and the blood begins to flow. It isn't always as bad as it may sound because sometimes they die under the scourging, and we don't have to go through the crucifixion. There could be a merciful side to it . . . "

"Well, we scourged this one -- that was part of the order - - and then he was to carry his cross. And as he carried his cross he fell underneath it. I want you to know the kind of a fellow I am - - I was pleased indeed when the order was issued that somebody could help carry that cross for him, and Simon Cyrene did it.

"Well we got to the place outside the city wall, and there the crucifixion took place - - I can see it, perhaps as nobody else saw it -- I was in charge, you know. And this man was different. And then something happened - - something happened inside of me. It was all so different."

"Oh, I should tell you that on occasion it would take twelve of us to restrain a criminal -- they hated death by crucifixion -- they'd act like mad people! . . . and to try to get that body pressed against that frame, and the way they'd respond when you had to pound the nails into the flesh . . . but this one was different. He allowed it to happen -- as though he was in complete control! He wasn't beside himself at all -- we were the ones who were losing control. But he wasn't.

" . . . and then, these strange stirrings within me! It wasn't so much what I could see, it was what I heard.....

...such a thing as "Father -- forgive them! -- they don't know what they're doing!"

....it was so different from anything else we had ever experienced because up to this point you should have heard the obscenities that came from accursed breath! -- of those who lashed out against us, their crucifiers -- the obscenities, the foulness of the language! But this man! -- "Father -- forgive them -- they don't know what they're doing!"

....we knew what we were doing alright! -- he said we didn't know what we were doing. We were following orders. We were putting a man to death, we were going to stay there until he died. We knew what we were doing. But he said we didn't know what we were doing -- and how right he was!!

"And then -- hear me now!" -- Longinus says to you people of Saint Luke Church who are going to be here next Good Friday at night -- "With whatever strength he had left he looked down from the cross. I couldn't quite allow my eyes to meet his eyes. but it was what

he said. He said to a man down there, I guess it was one of his disciples: "Now take care of my mother." I have never seen anything like that! - - 'Take care of my mother . . . '

"And then my eyes did meet the eyes of his mother . . . did you ever look--"
(Longinus is saying this to us now, the Roman centurian
is talking to us)

" . . . Did you ever look into the eyes of
a mother who is seeing her son die? -- innocent -- but dying the death
of a criminal? That got to me too.

"Why do I tell you all this?" the centurian says - - "Because when it was
all over I said what I had to say. I could not keep quiet. And I
said, "This is the son of God! This is a righteous man!"

"Why am I telling you this? I'm telling you what I experienced. I am
also telling you this, that I never heard a sermon that He preached --
I didn't know much about Him before I had this order in my hand.....
they said He performed miracles.....I was never present when a blind
man was able to see because of His touch - - I was never present when
a lame man was able to walk because He healed him. Since then I've
heard that He fed the multitude - - - I was never around when anything
like that happened. Get it again - - I never saw Him perform a
miracle.....I never heard Him preach.....and what is more, I don't
remember anyone ever telling me anything about Him. But for once in
my life I was exposed to Him -- there He was -- I saw Him. I was in
His presence, I was made aware of His sacrificial life and death. And
it got to me.

"And that's what I'm telling you. Until it happens to you -- until you
stand so-called naked in the very presence of God, you'll never know
what I'm talking about. And that's why, until the end of time, when

"CERTAIN PEOPLE: THAT WOMAN"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from
God our Father and from His
Son Jesus Christ, our Blessed
Lord. Amen.

When I was a lad growing up in that small town, I had the good fortune to get odd jobs. For a while I shined shoes, and then I discovered that when I was shining shoes I invariably would look at the shoes that people were wearing, as to whether they were in good shape and whether they were shined and polished....and if so, who did the shining and who did the polishing?

...I also had the good fortune to bottle milk -- and I soon discovered that I found myself unconsciously asking myself this question: Well, if they don't get milk from our dairy, I wonder who supplies their milk?

...Then for a while I worked in a grocery store -- and in that small town as you get to know where people live and what their habits are, you can easily identify them as to the place where they went to do their shopping.

...I worked for a while in the barber shop -- and before I knew it I was looking at the hairline of people. We only had two barber shops in that town, and then I used to say I could tell whether it was done by a kitchen mechanic, by a father perhaps, who would cut the hair of his children by using a pot or a crock.....

I say this to you for only one reason: it becomes a very easy thing for a person to become so interested in the thing that claims his time and his energy, that whether he wills it or not, he projects that when he thinks of his relationship with other people.

Now having said that to you, I want you to know that as a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, it comes to me very naturally as to wonder, when I meet people, as to how they're getting along with God? -- and how real that relationship is? I find this to be true no matter where I go. Not just because I happen to be a minister who was ordained, but a very natural thing. And it occurred to me that perhaps this should be true for any Christian, for anyone who has committed himself to Jesus Christ. As he finds himself related to other people, he ought to be asking himself that question: I wonder how well they know Jesus?...I wonder how much God has come

to mean to them?

I can say this to you as earnestly as I do for the very simple reason that come Tuesday of this week it will be 39 years since holy hands were placed in blessing upon my head, and I was set apart as a minister of the Word and Sacrament. And as I reflect upon this very sobering truth, it has occurred to me that throughout these almost four decades I've been dealing with people, part of the human scene, recognizing that down deep inside every one of them there is a longing that ultimately is satisfied by Jesus Christ and by Jesus Christ alone.

I don't know how seriously you have given consideration to such thinking, but there is such a thing not only as the human situation, there is also such a thing as the human predicament. And down deep inside every one of us there is a longing for something. We have a craving that doesn't quite get satisfied except as we get squared off in our relationship with God.

Are we not told by Sinclair Lewis in one of his novels about a certain man and a woman who have an encounter with each other, presumably by his inability to stay on the straight and narrow path. The man had established for himself a degree of respectability in his community, had succumbed to temptation, he has this kind of an alliance with this woman. And one day she confronts him with these words: "On the surface," says she, "we seem quite different. But deep down we are fundamentally the same: we're both desperately unhappy about something, and we don't quite know what it is." More than one reviewer of the book could conclude at this point, in every man, in every person, that is, there is this nameless unsatisfied longing, this vague discontent, this same lacking, this frustration, this longing. And what is it? A person just doesn't seem to know. Who then among us has not convinced himself that we seem incapable of fashioning happiness out of the human situation in which we find ourselves? Honestly now, is this not so?

Then there was that English writer who was no stranger to the fog that so easily and frequently envelops his beloved land. In his book there are two characters -- one, significantly enough, the father of the other -- a son, and a son that on occasion finds himself philosophizing in the presence of his father, who listens attentively. The boy is talking about life. He says that it's like groping in an enchanted fog -- the fog breaks down for a moment and there you see a moon, or perhaps the face of a girl -- small matter. And then in that moment you think you want the moon or you think you want the girl.....and just like that, the fog comes again and settles once more, only to leave one groping in that enchanted fog, for something which the boy admits he

can't quite call by name. Maybe that is our situation, maybe that is our predicament.

But let me go back and say to you what I said at the very beginning, that the fundamental truth remains: be puzzled by it as you may, there is a thirst for something in the human heart, which I say to you now in this place and with all the strength that I can command, that only Jesus Christ can satisfy.

Now all that I said to you is prefatory to the balance of this sermon that you are about to hear, a sermon that's another based on the general theme of Certain People encountered by Jesus Christ. And for want of a better title, today's sermon: "Certain People: That Woman" -- read all about it in the 4th chapter of the Gospel according to John. There is no other encounter that Jesus Christ had exactly like this one. Let me hurry as quickly as I can and tell you about it, giving you the historical perspective.

From the north to the south of Palestine you have about 120 miles. The southern part is Judea...the northern part is Galilee....and in between you have Samaria. Now it could take you about three days, in the day of Jesus, to go from the south to the north, if you went the circuitous route.....no, if you went the circuitous route it would take you twice as long -- three days if you went directly from Judea to Galilee by crossing through Samaria. But the Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans, they despised them, they hated them. So the average Jew wanting to get from Judea to Galilee took the circuitous route -- six days.

But now there's a critical period in the life of our Blessed Lord. Things were not going as well as He had hoped down there in Judea, so now He thinks He'll try His fortune in Galilee, to use a figure of speech. So to get to Galilee as quickly as He can He goes directly into Samaria. He's been traveling now, He's tired, He's weary. He does the very natural thing -- He stops at Jacob's Well. And He's thirsty.

Jacob's Well, they tell me, is about 100 feet deep. You can't just dip in there with your hand and get a handful of water that you put to your lips -- you have to have something with which to draw. And while He's thinking about this sort of thing, there looms upon the scene that woman. I say 'That Woman' because that may be the title you'll give to her after you read that 4th chapter of John -- she was quite a woman. She had quite a reputation, as any woman who has been married five times can tell you . . . a reputation comes very easily, whatever may be the reason for those five different alliances. And Jesus engages her in conversation....and that's the way it begins.

Now let me say as quickly as I can, I'm numbered among those who honestly believe that, all other things being equal, if you encounter a person anywhere, and you yourself have a commitment to Jesus Christ, then very easily now, within the time frame of fifteen minutes to a half-hour you will find yourself talking to this person about God. It just happens naturally, not only because of your commitment but because of the human situation and the predicament of man. I say this to you on good authority because that's exactly what happened in the case of Jesus Christ. No sooner had He begun to talk to this woman than they begin to talk about their basic relationship to God!

And you know what happened, don't you? If you're not inclined to think about God you become a bit nervous when people talk to you about God. Then if you can do it, you try to side-step the issue. When it becomes quite serious, you become, wittingly or unwittingly, a bit flippant.

And I suggest to you that as you read this fourth chapter of the Gospel according to John, you'll discover this kind of thing and this encounter. When Jesus got around to talking about the water of life and "free-flowing water in wells kind of supply"... and she saw that serious look in His eyes and she became a bit flippant -- and she suggested that perhaps He might be able to lay out a water-line for her! -- where she wouldn't have to come and draw water at so great a distance. It could be a matter of greater convenience for her.....a rather flippant remark on her part, honestly.

And then when she discovered that He was pressing the point and talking about what it really meant to her, she tries to deal with it in a broad sense -- tries to focus upon religion in general and the way other people worship. And all the while Jesus Christ was talking about her.... and He never took His eyes off of her.

I should also lay before you as earnestly as I can that this encounter took place where it did: not in a synagogue, not in a temple, not in sacred precincts, which is simply to refute all of us who think that we talk about God only when you walk upon hallowed ground such as this, that you talk about God only when you find yourself in a gathered company as this company. Not to be overlooked is the fact that Jesus Christ talked about God to her where He found her! -- at mid-day, by the side of the road, as she came to draw water.

God wouldn't make very great progress if this is the only place where people talked about God. The far greater percentage of people will never come to a place such as this. And that's why God depends upon us to talk about Him when we find people where they are. And that's exactly what He did. Which leads me to the next observation: He confronted her not only where she was, but as she was. He didn't wait for her to

share some measure of improvement in her personal life....He didn't wait for her to get her house in order and to get certain things straightened out. But He began at the point where she was. And that's the most difficult thing for some of us to remember. We'd much rather deal with people at the point where we think they ought to be. But that isn't where they are.

We who have been parents, we who are grandparents, know how extremely difficult it is to have to deal with the child in a temper tantrum that exists at that moment, and to try to cope with that kind of situation as it exists. And sometimes we forget that. My gratitude to many of you is very great for the way you've accepted me where I was at a particular point in my life -- and dealt with me, patiently. You know full well that some of you have done that. So our Blessed Lord as He deals with this woman, that woman, with the reputation -- accepted her at the point where she happened to be. He never lost sight of the goal that He had in mind. And when she tried to skirt the issue and she tried to get His mind off of the fundamental facet, He remained patiently firm. And the net result was that He ended up on target -- there was a conversion experience of sorts, her life was turned around and she began to think in terms of God primarily....

....and she couldn't wait to get away from Him, to run and tell her friends and kinfolk about this man -- this man who had an encounter with that woman....

And sometimes, if not always, that's what the Christian experience is all about -- that kind of person - - with this kind of Man.

* * * *

(transcribed as recorded)

"IN PRAISE OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

On this Day of Pentecost, frequently referred to as the Birthday of the Christian Church, I come to the sacred desk to speak a good word in behalf of this Church of Jesus Christ. And the text is the 18th verse of the 16th chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew:- -said Jesus Christ to Peter:

"Thou art Peter, and upon this rock will I build
my church, and the gates of hell shall not pre-
vail against it."

His answer was blunt, or as TIME magazine used to say when it referred to its style of reporting -- "curt...clear...complete." The question was put to the first President of the Lutheran Church in America, the Rev. Dr. Franklin Clark Fry (now of beloved memory) -- "Do you think the time will ever come in this state when the church will be persecuted?" . . . his blunt answer: "Persecuted? No. Ignored? Yes."

Despite whatever evidence we may hopefully glean to the contrary, there is reason to believe that for more people than we care to admit, the church is simply taken in its stride. We are the friends of the Church. We find ourselves numbered among the committed ones. But again and ever so frequently we take ourselves to task because our ardor is not greater. And if that should be said of us, then you can readily understand why I say a number far greater than we care to admit is made up of people who simply take the Church in stride -- showing little enthusiasm for what it is, for what it does, for what it represents, for what it's meant to be.

Who among you, driving today's automobile, cannot empathize with me now when I say that I found it far from a bit amusing, the day before yesterday that was, when I drove by one gas station after another, only to find the driveway blocked and the now-familiar sign: PUMPS CLOSED. And when I did find one, there was a line of cars waiting to be served, of course. But I did have my deep thoughts, deep thoughts other than having my tank filled. For soberly I reflected, Come now, would there be lines formed outside our churches if the word got out that there was a limited supply of religion available? -- if we could supply you only with a little amount, to get you a comparatively short distance down the highway of life? Now that's something to think about.

But be that as it may, whatever else you may hear or not hear regarding the Christian Church, I have come here today to say a good word in support of the Church. Without any hesitation, without any reluctance, I say a good word because it's the only institution, the only gathering, the only fellowship of people that I know on the face of the earth that is always asking people to think in terms of the God-perspective....

-- It is the only institution, the only agency, the only fellowship, the only gathering of people that's always pointing to someone over and beyond and above itself - - it's always trying to introduce the God-factor. When challenged to devote its energies to some worthy cause, it does so in the name of God....

-- It is the only institution, the only agency, the only fellowship, the only gathering of people that I know that places central in its life the worship of the Triune God....and when you and I come here, we come here not first to think about ourselves. But whatever thought we give to ourselves and to other people we do because we first think in terms of God.

The old Westminster Catechism of the Presbyterian Church used to put it this way in its first question: What is the chief end of man? - - and the fathers answered wisely and well: The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.

I sing the praise of the Christian Church for the simple reason that it is the only gathering of people, the only fellowship of people on the face of the earth that gives itself to being in this world as the mind and the spirit of Jesus Christ. What are we about? We're about the things that Jesus Christ was about when He was here on earth. You know very well that when He completed His mission He turned to people such as you - - as much as to say, "Now it is up to you -- you go now into the world and you do exactly the kind of thing that I have been doing! You preach! You teach! You heal! You have a genuine concern for the sorrow of people and the joys of people....

...let the hungry be fed

...let the ill-clothed be cared for

...let those in prison, the disadvantaged in life at whatever

level it may be, let them be ministered to . . . "

I sing the praise of the Church of Jesus Christ because it is the only agency, the only institution, the only gathering of people, the only fellowship that commits itself to carrying on the work of Jesus Christ. We don't do it as well as we should, and many of us don't do it as well as we know we are able to do it. But that doesn't

mean that we lose sight of the objective -- and I cannot say that of any other group on the face of the earth -- committed wholeheartedly in this sense, to being in the world today as the mind and spirit of Jesus Christ.

I sing the praise of the Holy Christian Church for the simple reason, in the third place, that it's the only institution, it's the only agency, it is the only fellowship that gives itself to responding to the Holy Spirit. Said Jesus Christ, "I will not leave you without witness -- I promise you the Holy Comforter, the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit." Says Luther in his explanation to the Third Article of the Creed:

"It is the Holy Spirit that draws us together, it's the Holy Spirit that enlightens us, that empowers us and nurtures us."

We are the only people on the face of the earth, we who are within the Church, who are responding to God's Holy Spirit. God gives Himself freely to all people. Said the great Swedish theologian, "We are all in the hands of God, whether with our belief or our unbelief." We who are in the Church are the ones who offer ourselves as His obedient servants.

I sing the praise of the Holy Christian Church for another reason: every testimony sooner or later has to be very personal. Bear with me now -- I sing the praise of the Church for it was the Church that introduced me to Jesus Christ through my parents. Much that I know about Jesus Christ I have come to know because of people such as you. I was not meant to walk alone any more that you were meant to walk alone -- there is no such thing as a solitary Christian. And I sing the praise of the Christian Church because the Church has given me people with whom I can relate, who make it easier for me to believe, who stimulate me to a greater commitment, who pick me up when I stumble on the road to Hell.

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Now I encourage you if you so believe, on this Day of Pentecost, to think of the time when you first committed yourself to Jesus Christ, and if you'd like to do it -- stand now and re-affirm your Confirmation vow with me . . .

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people think of the crucifixion, they're going to hear my voice.

For I am the one who bore testimony, and I am the one who called it
by name -- I am the one who said, This -- This is God!"

And if we can get Longinus to say it -- whoever takes his part next year,
if the Director of Dramatic Activity agrees -- he could say to us:

"For shame upon many of you people -- you've settled too easily
for what you've heard about Jesus Christ. Not that that isn't
important -- you've settled too easily for what you've read
about Jesus Christ....not that that isn't important. But where
is the person among you who can stand up from first-hand experience
such as mine and be able to say clearly, and with conviction:
Jesus Christ is God!"

....now that's something to think about.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

MEAN THAT WE LOSE SIGHT OF THE objective -- and I cannot say that of any other group on the face of the earth -- committed wholeheartedly in this sense, to being in the world today as the mind and spirit of Jesus Christ.

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* * *

(Transcribed as recorded)

"NO - - AND YES"

(Matthew 16:24)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ our Blessed Lord, Amen.

Presumably your thoughts are focused within these walls at this present moment. I admit to you, mine are not. For I am constrained to think of a woman in Denver, Colorado, a one-time member of this congregation, who when she moved to Colorado could not find it possible to separate herself completely from Saint Luke congregation in Silver Spring, Maryland. She asked for a very unusual thing -- to be able to become affiliated with a church in Denver, but then at the same time to retain a relationship with this parish.....

-- she reads the MESSENGER faithfully.....she relates to all that we do.....

And I have every reason to believe that at this precise moment, in Denver, Colorado, her thoughts are of you, the Confirmands in Saint Luke Congregation, Silver Spring, Maryland - - just as I am thinking of her in Denver, she is thinking of you in Silver Spring.

She was reared and trained, confirmed in the Faith, in East Germany. She was a refugee; she came to our shores. She knew what it was to be faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ in times of stress and strain. And what is she doing now as she thinks of you, the members of this year's Confirmation Class in Saint Luke Church? She has the copy of SAINT LUKE MESSENGER before her - - she's reading each of your names prayerfully, and with her Bible in hand she is checking out your Confirmation Verse.

I have mixed feelings about the assignment of your Confirmation verses -- you chose them for yourselves. There are times when I believe that you should not be given this privilege, but perhaps the pastor who is going to confirm you should make the selection. As he knows something of your mind, your spirit, your temperament, your personality, he might make bold to suggest to you the kind of a verse that could hold you in good stead all the years of your commitment to Jesus Christ.

I'm constrained to believe this rather fervently for the simple reason, and you might not be able to build a case at this point, but it seems to me reasonable to do so...

-- not a single one of you chose for your Confirmation verse the verse that I have seen fit to use as the basis for today's sermon. If I had it within my power

I would have selected it for at least one of you -- the 24th verse of the 16th chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew:

"If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

I think I can readily understand why you might not have chosen that verse. It's not a very easy or pleasant thing to think in terms of hurting and struggle, and when we think about Jesus Christ being crucified upon the cross, surely that's not the manner of death that you would prefer for yourself. Or if not to go that far, surely you would not choose a life of pain and suffering, and to make your exit from this world with so great a sacrifice. Nonetheless, I cannot come to this sacred desk at this particular time in your life without asking you to think upon this text.

The title for this sermon was chosen carefully: "NO - - AND YES" - - not "Yes Or No" as some of you might think when you think of those words, because on occasion there are people who look us straight in the eye and say, "Now answer me -- yes or no!" - - that's not the title for this sermon, for that's not the way the sermon is going to be developed. But significantly enough, the words carefully chosen are these:

"NO - - AND YES."

Oddly enough, that's the answer that you give on your Confirmation Day....

"If any man come after me, let him deny himself . . ."

...when a man is challenged by Jesus Christ to be his follower, the first answer that Jesus wants from that follower is to learn to say No.

I wish I could tell it to you otherwise but that's the reading of life. Evil is a very real thing, and the force of evil is at work in this world, the Devil is still in business, and the Devil will trail you to the very day that you breathe your last.

"If any man will come after me - - let him deny himself . . ."

You must first learn to say No.

It could make an interesting psychological study if you'd press back to the days of your childhood and maybe try to recall for yourself what word first made its impression in my ears -- Yes -- or No? As children when we were growing up, when we were about to do something that we shouldn't have done: "No - No - No!" We were taught very early in life that there are things that we dared not do. Maybe that's the point at which some of us began to learn the real meaning of life, to be able to say No.

It's a wicked world in which we live, there's no question about it. And as I think of the life of Jesus Christ, He never spent a great deal of time, in fact He

spent no time to my knowledge at all, in arguing about wickedness or evil -- as to where it came from. He began with the fact of evil. It was there! And He had to do business with it, and He mastered the fine art of saying No to the Evil One. So you, the young convert for Jesus Christ, you begin your commitment by saying No to the Devil, No to the evil, No to every force that would keep you from knowing the joy of being numbered in the ranks of the redeemed.

While I've never had the good fortune to experience a Confirmation Service in the Roman Catholic Church, I am told on good authority that when the Bishop comes and does the confirming . . . he is seated there within the shadow of the altar, and the confirmand approaches him....and as the Bishop is about to lay holy hands in blessing upon the head of the new recruit for Jesus Christ, he also gives a slap on the cheek -- it's a token to remind the person that as a soldier for Jesus Christ he must always be ready to do combat against the force of evil to be assailed against him. So you begin by saying No.

The words for the title of the sermon carefully chosen: "NO - - AND YES" - - and "FOLLOW ME." No one forces you to follow Jesus Christ. You may remember when I first met with you as we began our journey together toward this very destination, I told you that you did not have to be confirmed -- that any number of people will live and die without having the benefit of the kind of thing that you're experiencing now. But I did tell you as straight-forwardly as I could that if you were to be confirmed, it would be because you would be saying "Yes" -- this is what I prefer, this is what I want." And to whom are you saying Yes? You're saying Yes to Jesus Christ.

--We are so constituted that every single one of us has a master, every single one of us is a follower. How fortunate you are that your master should be none other than the Son of God, the Savior of mankind, who alone is worthy to be trusted with your life
...you're saying Yes to Jesus Christ.

-- You're saying Yes to your parents who have loved you, who have reared you in the Faith...

-- You're saying Yes to people who have remembered you in their prayers from the very day that you were born...

-- You're saying Yes to a company in Heaven for you are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses -- watching you, encouraging you, beckoning you onward, and as they call out to you, you're saying Yes to them....

You're saying Yes to the Church throughout the ages. You are not the first to take a stand for Jesus Christ -- you know that, of course you do. Nor will you be

the last. For in the years yet to come, even unto the end of time, as God gives you the faculty to be able to see those who are yet to be followers of Jesus Christ, you'll be saying, "Yes, the decision that I made was the right one." And you will never regret it to the day that you die.

* * *

(transcribed as recorded)

"ABOUT THE TRINITY"
(Matthew 28:18)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son
Jesus Christ, our Blessed Lord.
Amen.

I have been debating in my own mind as to whether or not I should announce the title for the sermon, for when I do announce it, it's at some risk. For chances are there are people in the congregation now who could be turned off when I tell you what it is that commands my concern today. Well here it is: I want to talk to you about the Trinity.

I haven't much thought about the Trinity, have you? At least you think you haven't much thought about the Trinity. But to all intents and purposes, as a good and faithful servant of the Church, the doctrine of the Trinity is always coming to the surface.

I am fully aware of the fact that when we talk about the festivals of the Church -- such as Christmas -- you have no problem understanding why Christmas should be included in the calendar of the Church. You might not come when we have the Festival of the Ascension, but you have no problem at all with understanding why we would include in the calendar of the Church the day that marks the return of our Blessed Lord to Heaven, or certain other festivals of the Church related to the life of our Blessed Lord. But when the Church sets aside in the calendar this day as the Festival of the Holy Trinity, surely it doesn't turn you on.....but I am in duty bound to talk to you about it. It is one of the great teachings of the Church. Bear with me, I'll do my best. You pray, and I'll struggle through the sermon.

I'm going to begin in a very simple way. I'm not going to be subtle -- I want you to know exactly why I'm going to do what I'm about to do: I'm going to give you a very simple illustration, born out of real life. Not many years ago I found myself sitting alone with my father, and as I sat and looked at him, I saw him in a perspective that I had never quite seen him before. I called certain things by name, and when I did that I gained a brand new appreciation for all that he was and for all that he had done. I sat there and looked at that man, my father. I began at that point, for that was his relationship to me -- a unique relationship. Of all the people on the face of the earth, only a limited number of us could look at that man and say "Father."

And as I looked at him I also realized that he was the grandfather of the two sons

for whom Winifred and I have responsibility. And I immediately began to shift gears and to see him not only as my father, but also as the grandfather of children.

And then my mind went back to a picture that I have in my study, a photograph of two people -- two people that I had never met, but two people who are very, very precious -- his parents. And then, all of a sudden I saw him in the role as a son -- this man that I first thought of in the role of a father, this man that I also came to think of in the terms of a grandfather. One person. But my deep appreciation for that man was enhanced and enriched when I began to realize these relationships -- one person: father....grandfather....son.

You know very well that when you come to think in terms of theology, or even Biblical truth, you can't always make an illustration stand on all fours. Any illustration, to all intents and purposes, is a feeble effort on our part to try to understand something. That's why we resort to the use of an illustration, that we might better understand it, if not fully.

Now when you come to think in terms of God, you and I have to recognize the fact that we are limited, we are finite. He is infinite. And I have my moments when I think it is rank presumption on the part of any of us to think that we can fully understand the mystery which is God. There is always this gap, this distance of awesome respect for all that God is. But thanks be to God, God knows that we stand to benefit by some so-called reasonable understanding of who He is and what He is. And let me say as quickly as I can, that's where the teaching of the Trinity comes into the picture.

Now there's a text for today's sermon, of course there is, and this is the text -- the 18th verse of the 28th chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew....for our purpose this morning it's the parting command:

"Jesus (according to J.B. Phillips' translation) says,

You, then, are to go and make disciples of all the nations and baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . "

Now I say to you very quickly, with all due respect to our Blessed Lord, wouldn't it have been a bit more simple if He simply would have said, "Now why don't you go in My name"? -- or, "God now in the name of God and do these things." Why not that directive? And why in Heaven's name, I ask it as respectfully as I can, do we persist in using the name of the Blessed Trinity over-and-over-and-over? This service began this morning -- what were the first words you heard from the lips of the officiating clergyman? -- "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." And when

this service is concluded today with the declaration of the Benediction, he will add magnificently: "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Why do we persist in allowing this always to surface?

May I suggest a reason. You never tell the whole story about God simply using three letters for a name. It is never enough simply to say, "I believe in God" -- as far as we Christians are concerned....because I have to say as fervently as I can, we Christians are not the only people who believe in God. There are many people who believe in God. But Christians are always reminding themselves of the kind of a God it is in whom they believe. We believe in the Triune God -- not simply God.

Now let me help you at this point as best I can. Bear with me. A person is as a person does. Now what do I mean by that? If I sat and looked at you and you remained immobile, and I gave you an hour of my attention, and I saw nothing but you sitting-still in front of me -- I could not have much of an appreciation for the basic nature and character of you as a person. But let me see you in action, even speaking certain words become an active expression of what you are....let me see you doing something, let me see the manner of your behavior -- let me see the kind of thing that commands your attention and your concern -- and I'll have a pretty good idea of the kind of person that you are. So let me say it to you again: a person is as a person does, and we Christians are always reminding ourselves of the kind of thing that God is up to.

So we begin where we ought to begin: He created us -- He created the world. Why? Out of pure fatherly goodness. It was love that prompted Him to do what He did -- not simply power, not the genius of a creative mind. A person is as a person does -- God is as God does. And we Christians are always reminding ourselves of the kind of God that we have, and we know what He is by what He's up to, by what He's doing. We say to ourselves, He created the world, and the crowning glory of His created world is man, a little lower than the angels, placing upon him glory and honor.

All right, is that all that God did? We Christians know differently. This God who made us continued His fatherly interest in us. And when we began drifting at a very rapid rate toward Hell, this God who has a continuing fatherly interest in us said, "I will not let them go to Hell. They were not made to go to Hell." And after He did a number of different things, this God whom Christians have come to love because of what He does, gets into the act Himself, as far as the Church is concerned:

"I, I myself will come to my people."

....so God comes to us in human form....

God is as God does: creates the world, and then steps into the act to save us, to do for us what we couldn't possibly do for ourselves.

Christians are always reminding themselves of what it is that God does.

-- you sell God short if you simply think of Him in terms of a
Creator-God

-- and you sell Him short if you simply think in terms of One
who came to us and was born the Babe of Bethlehem --
wonderful as that is!

We march on to remind ourselves that God is at work in the world today -- God is at work through His Church! You and I are here right now because God is at work in the present times. Luther is absolutely right in his explanation of the Third Article of the Creed - - it is the Holy Spirit that brings us together -- "gathers us, enlightens us, empowers us, nurtures us in the faith." And for some people, unfortunately, when they think about God, they forget all about God the Holy Spirit who is at work in and through them right now.

Small wonder, then, that Jesus when He gave the command said to them: "Now you go, and when you do this you do this in the name of one God who creates, who redeems, who enables you to grow in the Spirit and respond to His grace.....Father, Son and Holy Spirit."

If I simply said, "I believe in God" - - what then do I have beyond my Mohammadan friend? If I simply said, "I believe in God" - - what then do I have beyond my Jewish friend? But Christians are people who are always reminding themselves of the totality that God makes available for us. And my years have taught me that whenever the Church grows weak in its understanding of the Trinity, it lacks the necessary power that it needs to fulfill its role in the world today. So I greet you this day in the strong name of the Trinity: God the Father,

God the Son,

God the Holy Spirit

...bless and keep you. Amen.

* * * *

(transcribed as recorded)

"ABOUT TWO BOYS"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Preachers are different, you know that. And that's one reason why you ought to be all the more interested in this question: How do they go about preparing their sermons? Not all preachers prepare their sermons in the same way. Some, I suppose, are given to a concern, a pre-occupation, with timely topics - - they read the newspaper, they read the latest book, they try to concern themselves with what it is that is uppermost in the minds of their people from week to week. And then in the quiet of their study they may search the Scriptures for a text that they could use as they address a timely topic.

Some of us, however, are given to a concern for timeless truths, which is something different. As we study the Scriptures we know a measure of satisfaction in realizing that God's truth that claims our attention could also be made relevant to whatever may be the problem that may be uppermost in people's minds.

Now having said that, let me say a word about this preacher that stands at this sacred desk. How does he begin? There's profound empathy for what I've just said -- a high regard for timeless truths that can be made relevant. Well, this preacher begins first, you ought to know this, with an earnest endeavor to make himself responsive to the Holy Spirit. The man who stands at the sacred desk is simply his agent, the channel through which the Holy Spirit is proclaiming His message. So first, as prayerfully as I can, I endeavor to make myself responsive to the Holy Spirit as I hold in my hands the Good Book; and as I ponder the sacred writings, one passage of Scripture after another warrants attention, and then hopefully, as that passage is studied and as is true for the Scripture referring to this day in the Calendar of the Church, The Nativity of St. John The Baptiser, there will be some light shed on something that's relevant.

Now having said all of that, what can I say to you now? Well, I was pleased to discover as I wrestled with this passage of Scripture that it could be relevant to some of you - - not all of you, perhaps, but every now and then someone might rise up within his soul and say, "You're speaking to my condition."

And what kind of a person would you be? Well, the kind of person who has to deal with competition in your inter-personal relationships. If you've ever discovered that you're either being threatened, or that there's someone else doing the same kind of work that you are doing, how now can you meet that situation with grace, with dignity and with integrity? All of us, I presume, at some time or another find ourselves in that kind of a situation: how to deal with competition?

Really now, as I get into the thrust of this sermon, I want to talk to you about two boys, two boys who stem pretty much from the same stock. They were, as you can read for yourself in the Good Book, second cousins. Their mothers had a most remarkable experience when it came time for each of them to give birth to a man-child. Mary is the name of one of these mothers, Elizabeth is the name of the other. They lived pretty much in the same general area, the mothers of these two boys. Their mothers thoroughly enjoyed getting together and sharing their concerns during their pregnancy -- the one was born six months sooner than the other, and because they lived pretty much in the same general area I would like to think that they were play-mates.

Now as you read the Good Book and look at their lives, there were certain differences and certain things that they had in common. This difference set in: the one boy grew up in a small town and served as an apprentice to a carpenter....the other boy in his formative years grew up, of all places, in the wilderness! -- didn't have much association with people, he was an ascetic, he was a hermit. And now with the perspective that becomes us in recent years, I think I could tell you that he would be classified, had he lived today, as a "hippie." And chances are the hippies of our generation who would have taken him seriously would have looked upon him as their patron saint. He didn't dress as other people dressed . . . he didn't live as other people lived.

Now his cousin, who grew up in the small town, worked in the carpenter shop. And then the time came when it was made very plain to both of them that they were to be preachers. Now here's where you enter the arena of competition: both of them were meant to be proclaimers of the truth of God. And after a while each discovered, I suppose I can put it to you this way, that they were not alike in their emphases, not alike in their methods.

The one came preaching -- well, I might as well tell you -- hellfire, brimstone and damnation -- I don't think you would have liked his preaching. Most of you don't squirm very easily, most of you don't like preaching on the negative side. But he had a way of doing that sort of thing and proclaiming the Kingdom of God only to frighten them to a remarkable degree.

The other preacher was far more winsome. He loved to tell stories, and by the grace of God he was able to make His truth relevant. He was forever encouraging people to be better than they were....he was always appealing to the other side of their nature, that is, the better side of their nature. He believed in the inherent goodness of man, and he tried always to introduce them to a Heavenly Father who was smiling benignly upon them. He was forever trying to introduce that precious ingredient of joy into the Christian experience.

The one, I should tell you also, was anti-social, having lived for years separated from people. And there were those who took him to task because he was that kind of person. And the other preacher, and you'll recognize this, was referred to sometimes as a "wine-bibber" -- as a person who associated overmuch with harlots, and publicans, and sinners. That's the way they put it. You can read it for yourself in the Bible.

Now why do I tell you all of this? To emphasize again the contrasts in their personalities, to emphasize again the contrasts in their techniques and their strategies and their approaches. Yet God saw fit to use both of them. God needed each one of them. And the competition was pretty keen, if not in their own eyes, then in the eyes of their congregations. And every now and then there were people who came and brought this to the attention of one preacher as over against the other. Now how do you handle that?

It isn't simply what you have to handle on your own, it's what you have to handle, perhaps, by well-meaning friends. And one time there was a group of people who came to John the Baptist when John was on the down side of life, almost devastated, imprisoned as he was, and John didn't quite know what to do about it, because temporarily at least he had some misgivings. Now what do you do in a case like that, when you have to get along with somebody? Well, John the Baptist did the only decent thing that a man can do, he sent word to Jesus, and he said as much as -- "Level with me! What is the real story? Are you, or aren't you?" To the everlasting credit of John the Baptist, on the down-slope of things he could still be honest -- and reached out to his friend, his cousin.

Now having said all of that, what else can I tell you? They recognized the fact that they were different, and neither one tried to re-make the other. And that's a very salutary thing to keep in mind. Many of us have a tendency to re-cast people, to want them to be exactly in the mold that we think they ought to be. But John the Baptist never tried to re-make Jesus Christ. If that's the way he was going to preach -- so much the better! If that's the way he was going to live -- that was up to Jesus. And when Jesus had to think about John the Baptist, He never tried to re-make him, and accepted Him as He was.

I say this with some degree of compassion and conviction at the same time because I can remember the struggle that I've had with those who are younger than I am who cry out and say, "But let me alone -- I've gotta be me! -- This is the way I am!" I am grateful for whatever maturity compels me to say:

"All right, go on being what you want to be -- but just don't settle too easily for something less than what you ought to be.... don't let this damnable concept of 'I've gotta be me' -- this self-expression, become a cop-out. You've a right to be what you ought to be!"

And God is always helping us to become what we ought to be.

Now, with the differences that existed between John the Baptist and Jesus, they got along quite well -- because of the precious ingredient called integrity. Their objectives were the same, their methods and approaches were somewhat different. But as long as the element of integrity is present, you can afford to respect someone whose attitudes and approaches may be somewhat different than yours.

I have not hesitated on occasion when I've come to this sacred desk to be somewhat transparent with you, and to become somewhat personal. For the moment, allow me to do that. I remember reading one time in the Lutheran, the official journal of the Lutheran Church in America, of an interview between one of their reporters and the Associate Pastor of this congregation. And when I came upon that paragraph that dealt with, as I am sure the reporter would have dealt with it sooner or later -- and with a degree of relish, hoping that the answer could have been different than it was....

-- the reporters put to your Associate Pastor the question: "How do you get along with the Senior Pastor?"

...knowing full well that the Senior Pastor happened to be his father. I was deeply gratified when I read in that interview his answer, for his answer, as some of you may remember, was different -- a very realistic one:

"We're a generation apart -- he's a quarter-of-a-century older than I am. Our approaches may be different, but our goals are the same, and we have mutual respect."

I cannot begin to tell you how deeply gratified I was when I read what I knew to be true, else we could not have this relationship together. And this is the kind of thing that I would ask not only from him but from any staff member, anyone with whom we work, that we have this respect for one another's integrity.

Now one other thing that I need to tell you about these two boys who grew up to be preachers with keen competition, if you want to put it that way. When the word got back to John the Baptist that Jesus presumably was getting an edge on him, turning out to be a far more popular preacher, what did John the Baptist do? John the Baptist said, "Very well! He must increase - - I must decrease." To the everlasting credit of John the Baptist, he saw himself, if not as the bridegroom, then as the Best Man!....and if not as the chief actor, then as one called upon to give a supporting role. And that's how the story happily ends.

It's a great story about two boys who grew up in the same general area, who went about doing much the same thing. Both were preachers, somewhat different than the other - - but both recognizing the claim of God upon their souls - - bent on serving Him. It's a great story.

* * * *

(transcribed as recorded)

Of more than ordinary interest to you now is what I'm about to tell you: we reached into the file that carries his name, and there with that yellow sheet of paper given to him just before he was confirmed in Saint Luke Church -- this was his Confirmation Verse:

"Therefore be imitators of God as beloved children, and walk in love; as Christ loves us and gave himself for us, a fragrant offering as a sacrifice to God."

Never underestimate the value of a Confirmation service. Some youngsters who have been confirmed tell me that every time they come to receive the Holy Communion they remind themselves of their Confirmation vows and repeat silently within their hearts their Confirmation verse. This was his verse.

Of equal significance for us is his answer that he gave at that time, an impressionable teenager, to this question: What does it mean to be a Christian? You know we make much of that in Saint Luke Church, that when a person is confirmed, he's not simply identifying with the adult Christian community, but as one who has reached the age of reason he is publicly professing faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. This was his answer to the question -- a teenager's answer to a question: What does it mean to be a Christian?

..."It means," said he, "I should practice being a Christian in every way all the time, not just on Sundays, and do all I can to spread the Gospel."

How did he get that way, the teenager? You helped make him that way, not simply what he received by nurture from his parents and within his family circle; because you in Saint Luke Church provide the climate, the environment by which he could grow and think in such terms. You are the ones who helped him to understand, as you exemplified in your own lives what it is to be a Christian. That's the first thing that I bring to your attention -- that all of us have been part of his preparation for the Gospel Ministry.

And the second thing is this: we need to note how the Holy Spirit operates -- through people, of course. And every now and then the Holy Spirit claims this person and that person, as He may not claim other people. Every now and then it's this person who is especially singled out, granted that there has been the bestowal of exceedingly precious endowment, and if this person is singled out as over against that person, that it remains a mystery -- why?

I have never been reluctant to become transparent with you when I stand at the sacred desk.....I was one of six youngsters -- three brothers, two sisters. Never so much as anyone wearing the cloth in my family, to the best of my knowledge. Why, then, should God point His finger at me, and set me aside for the kind of thing that you've allowed me to share with you for more than two decades, and 39 years in the Ministry

of Jesus Christ? A mystery, of course. Which leads me to say that whatever else can be said, this much is to be maintained -- the priest, the pastor, the minister is still God's particular person, set aside for a particular purpose, to minister to a particular people at a particular time and place.

Now having said that, the thrust of this sermon comes now, in the third level. We must recognize, however, that while some people are set aside and particularly, there is such a thing as the priesthood of all believers. Martin Luther, you know, came down heavily at this point. For our purpose let's consider definition before we go on to doctrine. Define a priest -- come on, what is a priest? I know your answer, of course I do. You lean heavily upon the dictionary: a priest is one who has authority to administer the Sacraments and to pronounce Absolution. And that definition is generally accepted -- and usually, then, the priesthood is considered as being a very limited company.

With great joy in my heart let me remind you now of a verse of Scripture in addition to the text that serves for this sermon: the 23rd verse of the 20th chapter of the Gospel according to John: the words of our Blessed Lord, spoken to some people, some very precious people, who were His followers:

" . . . Whosoever's sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them, and whosoever's sins ye retain, they are retained . . . "

Our Roman Catholic friends, I should tell you, make much of that passage, and they allow themselves to believe that only a priest, then, can grant absolution. In Father Hunter's (?) book called "Dogmatic Theology" he has written regarding this Roman Catholic view. "The priest's absolution is not merely the pronouncement that a penitent has been forgiven. It is a judicial act, and the word of absolution is in itself efficacious, even though spoken not sincerely but in a joke. Its efficacy does not depend on the character of the priest. Even priests who are in mortal sin have power to bind and to loose. The reason is that it is the Rite of Ordination that confers the authority of Absolution, and it follows that only a priest possesses that authority. Priests alone can give Absolution."

I'm also reminding you that it was back in 1906 when a Pope of the Church in an encyclical of the Church maintained that the Church was an unequal society, that the priests were in one category and the laity in the other. With all the strength that I can command this morning, let me remind you of how we differ -- our tradition maintains the priesthood of all believers, that the disciples to whom Jesus Christ gave such a wonderful commission is a far wider band than eleven persons. In Luke, the 24th chapter, we are reminded that the eleven were gathered together . . . and them

that were with them -- they are the ones who were told that they were to go and live as redeeming agents of Jesus Christ . . . to be able to say to other people, "This God who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is a good God and a great God, and a gracious God, who forgives us our sins."

Do I have to remind you that to all intents and purposes the early band of disciples were lay people, people such as you, to whom Jesus Christ said, "Now you go, and you tell people -- not only as you preach and teach and baptize, but you tell them that their sins are forgiven."

In a day such as ours, when people are so sorely tried and troubled, the thing that they need most is the assurance of the redeeming love of Jesus Christ. Now while God calls certain people and sets them aside as pastors and priests, what is their primary function but to give themselves as wholeheartedly as they can, free from the other endeavors in the world, to remind all the rest of us, to enable all the rest of us, to be let loose in this world, to share and to become channels by which the love of God is communicated to other people?

Do I have to tell you that any one of you could be in the position at any time to be able to do for someone else what he needs most to have done for him? -- to remind him that God loves him, that God forgives him? Do I have to remind you that from the Christian perspective every saint has his past and every sinner has his future? And that's the kind of thing that can happen to you! And that's the kind of thing that could happen to me.

Do I have to remind you that on occasion, however, we fall short, that the one thing that any number of us fails to do is to see that people are assured that their sins are forgiven and laid no more against them? You and I, human as we are, have a way of retaining sins against certain people -- we have this image of them, the despicable characters that they are . . . we have had this unfortunate experience, we've seen them in a weak moment, when they've succumbed to the tempter, and we've never rid our minds of that! Strange, isn't it, how charitable we can be with ourselves, how easily we can claim the grace of God . . . and just as easily on occasion we can keep it from other people. You and I have a way of freezing people into a mold, branding them the sinners that they are! -- but forgetting that they are sinners who are meant to be forgiven. And the thing they need most is to be told that -- by you! by me!

When I began my ministry I recalled the days in which I grew up in that small Pennsylvania town. And my preacher told me how once a woman came, under his gracious influence by the Holy Spirit, to a Confirmation -- a woman who had a disreputable past.

Claimed by God's love, with a measure of joy in her heart she came to church one Sunday....only to be ostracized. She tried to control herself as best she could, but she did stand up once the service was over, feeling what was so evident, and simply cried out -- with the lament of her soul, "Isn't there any place in this town where a sinner who's been forgiven can feel at home?"

" . . . Search me. O God, and try my heart; know me,
and know my mind . . . "

....when there is such unforgiving nature
in my soul, cleanse me by your grace! . . .

What is the most wonderful thing that you know, my friend, in the sight of God? It's God's forgiveness! Every single one of us has sinned and come short of the glory of God. And as we've gone to God and asked for forgiveness, then we're intended to pass it on -- every Christian is a priest. And what is a priest? Let me tell it to you this way: A priest is one who goes from man to God and who comes from God to man. And that's where you and I remain in the picture.

You may not be called to preach.....

You may not be called to teach.....

You may not be called to serve in the healing arts.....

But in your baptism, every single one of us has been called by God, to offer to Him as a sacrifice our lives, and our daily work.

I close with a very simple illustration that needs no further comment. It's a tombstone in England on which have been carved these words:

HERE LIES THE BODY OF THOMAS WHITE,
WHO FOR 45 YEARS REPAIRED
SHOES IN THIS VILLAGE TO
THE GLORY OF GOD.

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed
as recorded)

"OF FEAR AND FAITH"

(Mark 4:40)

GRACE, MERCY and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son
Jesus Christ, our Blessed Lord.
Amen.

Today's sermon is based upon the Gospel for the Day, and it bears the title: "OF FEAR AND FAITH" -- and the text is the 40th verse of the 4th chapter of the Gospel according to Mark, the words are the words of Jesus Christ, spoken to a group of troubled disciples:

" . . . He said to them, 'Why are you afraid?
How is it that you have so little faith?' . . . "

Tell me, what do you do when a question is being asked? Chances are you can either answer directly, or indirectly. You can answer precisely, or imprecisely. Or you can do what some people have done -- give what may be called the unkindest cut of all: you answer a question by asking a question. To all intents and purposes this text that I've just read for you is a case study in two questions, where the second question becomes the answer to the first question.

That's how our Blessed Lord handled it, and I dare say handled it magnificently. You have to know the setting. For those of us who have had the good fortune to travel in the Middle East and to visit the Holy Land, we count as a pleasant recollection the day at the Sea of Galilee. Any guide who takes the visitor to the Holy Land will tell his people that if it appears now to be calm and tranquil, it's not always so. But very quickly, without any notice whatsoever, a storm can come and cause quite a tempest.

It could well have been that that was the case when our Lord, in a boat with a group of disciples, had fallen asleep. Then the storm came quickly. They were panic-stricken. They stir Him....He takes over. (You can read it for yourself in the Bible) He calms the troubled sea.

But Jesus Christ is never satisfied simply in meeting the physical situation at hand. Jesus Christ never concerned Himself primarily with the situation. He invariably addressed the predicament. And you and I must remember that: it is our predicament that remains and frequently causes us the greatest trouble -- not the situation alone. It's our inability to cope or not to be able to cope with what we have to face. It's the kind of person that we bring to the situation that remains paramount.

So our Blessed Lord, having calmed the sea, He turns to His disciples and put a question to them: "Why are you afraid? How is it that you have so little faith?" They were afraid, of course they were. And you and I would have been afraid. Man is by nature a fearful person.

Do I remember correctly, as I've told you before, haven't I? -- that when we were taught in childhood and adolescent psychology that we're born into this world with two basic fears. Why, when you hold a child, do you support him from his bottom? For the simple reason that a child is born into this world with the fear of a fall. And that's why a child responds to us when there's always that gracious token of support. It's not simply that we want to be coddled and held close, but this fear of falling is taken away when that hand is there.

-- Did they not also teach us that a child is born with a fear of loud noises -- and that's why many of us find ourselves in the presence of children talking softly, perhaps, and especially so when we go into their room at night, lest we startle them, lest any sound of our voice be as the sound of a loud noise.

And all other fears, then, that you and I have we acquired along the line. But man is by nature a fearful person. Small wonder, then, that again and ever so often when our God addresses us, He begins by saying, "Be not afraid" --

...the angel did that at the birth of Jesus Christ. They were startled! But God says, "Don't be afraid"...

...In the garden at the Resurrection -- startled by what they had to face! -- God's representative says, "But don't be afraid"

And man, who is by nature fearful, faces death -- many people -- afraid. So that our Blessed Lord called His disciples aside and said to them, as He anticipated His death, "But don't be afraid." Bernard Shaw said there is only one universal passion -- now this is interesting. He doesn't refer now to love...he doesn't refer to hate. He says the universal passion is fear. It's the one thing we all have in common. Believing, of course, that some people are incapable of loving...believing, perhaps, that some people just can't hate, no matter how easy we may make it for them to do....

(Cathryn Louise McAbee will please go to the rear of the nave)

Man is by nature fearful. Fear is one thing, fearfulness is another. Who was it who wrote, Fear is a biological instinct planted in our being to protect us from needless risks and to promote our efficiency -- you know that to be true. There are some things we do better because we are driven by fear. Some of us sometimes behave better than we ordinarily behave because we are afraid of what would happen if we did what we shouldn't have done and would be caught.

Fearfulness, however, is quite a different matter. It is fear driven to excess, gone wild and rank and out of and beyond control. And I myself would quickly add, fearfulness is the kind of thing that overcomes us when we have no reliance upon the reliance upon the reliability of God, when we fail to recognize the precious truth that God is always within reach -- He's reliable, and He will always act responsibly.

Now I am going to suggest something for you that may seem strange, maybe you never thought of it in these terms, but be patient with me. Whatever you are at 10:00 o'clock in the morning, whatever you are at 2:00 o'clock in the afternoon, you will be more-so, to all intents and purposes, at 11:00 o'clock at night. If you have had to face something vexing at 10:00 in the morning, and it remains there at 2:00 o'clock in the afternoon, and you've had your dinner and you've gone off to bed at night and the matter is still unresolved -- whatever you have been at 10:00...whatever you have been at 2:00, you are more-so at 11:00 o'clock at night. For when darkness settles in, that burden, whatever it is, is resting pretty heavily upon you. I speak out of my own experience.

And that's why there are times when I'd give almost anything if I could shake it before darkness settles in, because when the world becomes quiet the burden of the day can become far more severe than ever before. I can appreciate what H. G. Wells meant when he wrote, "As night goes around the earth, always there are hundreds of thousands of people who should be sleeping, lying awake in their beds fearing a competition...

- lying awake, dreading the fact that they might not be able to make good...
- lying awake at night when they ought to be sleeping, because they are ill from some illness they cannot comprehend...
- lying awake at night when they ought to be sleeping, because they are distressed by some irrational quarrel...
- lying awake at night when they ought to be sleeping, because they are maddened by some thwarted instinct, or some suppressed and thwarted desire....

Do I not speak fresh from your own experience? Is this not true, need I ask? Man is by nature fearful. The disciples simply in that troubled boat became Exhibit A for all of us.

I think of the writings of Victor Hugo. He had his trilogy, which I am pleased to refer to as a "Trilogy of Fears." What is his () Of The Sea" -- if it isn't his understanding of man's fear of nature? What is his "Les Miserables" if it isn't his understanding of man's fear of falls? And when he wrote "Notre Dame de Paris" -- did he not have in mind man's fear of God? You can have your own trilogy, of course you can, and I have mine. Most of them end up in this manner -- three basic fears with which we have to contend:

Fear of the past. I've told you this before, haven't I? Some people are deeply troubled because the past is always catching up with them, and they are afraid of the fact that that is true -- they can't quite shake it, the memory of things said that shouldn't be said, the memory of things done that shouldn't be done. Would to God we could begin all over again. Many a person thinks and feels that way and is crippled by the fact that he is a person with a past. And some of us are afraid -- the past that is always catching up with us.

There are some people who are afraid of the present moment. Happily they can say to themselves, well the past is over, that door is closed, that chapter is ended. That's a wonderful thing to be able to do. I remember a woman one time -- somebody said to her, "But don't you remember that unfortunate chapter?" And, bless her soul, she very calmly replied, with an air of triumph, "I remember precisely closing the door to that chapter -- that's how I remember it." But the present? Now. It's unavoidable, it's inescapable. It can be so demanding: the decision that has to be made today....the person who is coming down the same side of the street on which you happen to be and you can't have the opportunity to cross -- the encounter cannot be avoided.

Some people are terribly afraid -- the past is over, not of that. The future? They can steel themselves against it maybe. But the present?

Then there are some folks who are crippled by their fear of what is yet a possibility. Really now, as I ministered to her yesterday in the hospital, "My mother, Pastor, she died of cancer. I'm afraid of these tests that they're making now -- "... always the possibility of what could be -- "Pastor, our neighbor down the street, they've been married 30 years -- their marriage is falling apart. What if that should happen to my husband and me?" . . . always the possibility.

Did I ever tell you, last year when I had a physical, the strange reaction that I had? Years before I could always check off with a measure of delight the things I didn't have. Now -- I face that chart with the awesome fear that these things I could still yet get! Some people can handle the past....some people can take care of the present, we are surrounded by enough to support us. But what if we face the future with diminishing strength? Man is by nature fearful.

But our Blessed Lord says, "Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid." I am happy to tell you, when David Livingstone went to darkest Africa, the thing that gave him the greatest measure of assurance was the text that constituted the words of Jesus Christ: "Lo, I am with you always." -- and that helped him face what he had to face without fear, because of the knowledge of the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ.

I can't conclude this sermon without telling you, as well I should, that some people are afraid of the weight of their sins. What to do with the sins I've committed? - - afraid that they will be held against us. And when death confronts some of us, we know that our hands are not clean and our heart is not pure. The marvelous message of the Christian faith is that even in the face of the man's sin, the fear of eternal condemnation can be taken away when one learns to trust the gracious hand of God. And this I most certainly believe.

* * * *

(transcribed as recorded)

"EVERY CHRISTIAN A PRIEST"

(I Peter 2:5)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

In anticipation of what lies ahead for us this afternoon, when a young man is set apart as a Minister of Word and Sacrament, I am constrained to think with all of you this morning upon a sermon entitled: "Every Christian A Priest" -- and the text is the 5th verse of the 2nd chapter of First Peter:

" . . . who also as living stones are built up to
be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. . . "

Let it be clearly understood, today is an important day in the life of the Church-at-large, and especially in the life of this congregation. A young man, baptized, confirmed in the faith within the shadow of this altar, will have holy hands placed in blessing upon his head. Ordained, he will be set apart as a Minister of the Word and Sacrament.

Now there are several things that I am constrained to say to you at this time. First, we must remember that all of us in this congregation have been part of his preparation. We would do ourselves a disservice, and the church, if we were to permit ourselves to think that his preparation for the Gospel Ministry is something that's happened only on a college campus, or because of the prayers of his parents, or because of what he has received in divinity school. Important as all of these are, nonetheless it must be said that every single member of this congregation has been part of his preparation for the Gospel Ministry.

Here he came to Sunday School, and here there were those who opened for him the Good Book -- taught him the Bible stories, made a dent upon the impressionable fabric of his soul of the truth and the love of Jesus Christ....

...kept talking to him about the purposes of God...kept talking to him about the Holy Christian Church....kept talking to him about the claim that God could make upon him as one person, of something that he could do in the name of Jesus Christ.

Here he participated in Youth Ministry...here he participated in Music Ministry...here he came for Catechetical Instruction....here he was named for Jesus Christ, here he took advantage of the opportunity to confirm his faith publicly.

"WHAT PRESIDENT CARTER WILL NOT TELL YOU TONIGHT"
(What's Wrong?)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Mark 7.23

Only rarely, as you well know, do I do the sort of thing that I'm about to do now -- not preaching the sermon that I had planned to preach this day, but rather against the mood and the spirit of our country I've decided to speak to you on a sermon that could be titled in a number of different ways. And perhaps one title could be this: "What President Carter Will Not Tell You Tonight" . . . the subtitle could be: "What's Wrong?" - - wherein the source of our difficulty?

There's a text, of course there's a text, for I have no right to come to this sacred desk unless I am inspired to interpret for you something that's written in the Good Book. The text, the words of our Blessed Lord spoken to a group of people such as you, recorded as the 23rd verse of the 7th chapter of the Gospel according to Mark:

"And Jesus said, 'What comes out of a man is what defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.

All these evil things come from within, and they defile a man.'"

It's been going on, now, as you know -- one contingent after another going to Camp David --the President presumably taking on the role of a listener - - - "You tell me now." That's what we have been told to believe is

what's been going on.

And as though that were not enough, on two occasions quietly he slipped away to encounter a person in his own setting and ask this individual or that individual to tell him how he sees it. The President has led us to believe that he did not give the speech that he planned to give, according to the scheduled time, because he honestly believes that what we're confronting now is something far greater than whether or not you're going to get gas at the pump tomorrow morning...or whether or not they'll have enough fuel to keep your home comfortable come winter. We're led to believe that he honestly believes that throughout the world and in this country in particular things are not as they ought to be. So the sub-title, I suppose, remains: "What's Wrong?"

Hear now this quotation, please.

"Something's wrong with today's world. What is wrong with us? We have everything. We abound with all things that make us comfortable . . . "

(so it seemed, I add quickly)

" . . . yet something is not there that should be, something we once had. Why has the moral deterioration set in among us that brings corruption, loose behavior, dulled principles, subverted morals, easy expediences, sharp practices - - - what is it? No one seems to know. But everybody seems to believe that it's upon us. No one seems to know what to do to meet it, but everybody worries "

What I have just quoted for you was written more than thirty years ago.

My purpose in reading this quotation for you is simply to suggest that we're not the first generation to say that something's wrong. My reading

of life, with the perspective that God has given me across these years from the vantage-point that I now have, is that we have always lived in a world that was not quite right. Only now, you see, the difference could be we're confronted with the possibility of a change in life-style. The wheels that rolled so easily in other years could be taken away, or we could be denied their use. And the comfort that we so thoroughly enjoyed where we live and where we work could not always be guaranteed -- the setting of the thermostat could make all the difference in the world in some people's productivity and some people's temperament, and some people's disposition. The very thought of it can be unsettling for some people.

So the pinch is on now. But as I come to this sacred desk I am constrained to remind you that the world has never been the paradise that some people are inclined to think that it's been.

I have been reading, across the years, certain periodicals that I get from England. I clipped this one maybe ten years ago. Some clever chap put it this way:

" . . . our forefathers did without sugar until the 13th century . . .

. . . our forefathers did without coal fires until the 14th century . . .

. . . people didn't know anything about buttered bread until the 16th century....coffee, tea and soap -- they came along with the 17th century . . . "

....listen to this list:

" . . . gas, matches, electricity -- the 19th century "

You're making your own list now of the 20th century, aren't you? -- cars,

canned or frozen foods....radios....TV.....air transportation - - - these came along with the 20th century. And the writer of this column simply concluded by saying:

" . . . now what was it that you were complaining about?"

The second purpose to be served in this sermon could well be that our life-style could be altered, and without serious effect. Other people before us have known a measure of deprivation. The only difference would seem we've become so accustomed to it, we don't give up very easily.

I have come to this sacred desk this morning to interpret a verse of Scripture for you. And as I do that I do it against this framework, to substantiate anew in your mind that something is wrong. As one is confronted with that fact he deals with a series of accusations - - -

What's wrong? Accusation Number One:

We have never quite learned to live together on the face of this universe as a family. We have never quite mastered the art of peace-making. Since the beginning of recorded history the world has enjoyed peace only 8% of the time. It's been recorded that only 286 of the 3,521 years have been warless. The sobering fact confronts us now -- 8,000 peace treaties have been signed...and broken, in that time.

What's wrong? Accusation Number Two:

Politicians are in need of a code of honor. We have been saying that, haven't we? We have been allowing ourselves to become sensitive to this as though we've discovered it. I grew up as a teenager under the influence of Herbert Hoover. Let me read for you now what he said, in the days of my youth - - -

"We have a cancerous growth of intellectual dishonesty in public life which is mostly beyond the law. In its frustration the Congress is groping for some sort of code of ethics. The issue today is decency in public life against indecency. Our dangers are that we may commit suicide from within by compliance with evil, or by public tolerance of scandalous behavior "

How many years ago was Herbert Hoover in the White House? The world has always been in trouble. Perhaps we're a little bit more sensitive to it now because we're beginning to feel a kind of pinch that makes us ask a question that deals with broader things.

What's wrong? Accusation Number Three:

We have never had a greater measure of delinquency among our young people. In the early 1950's, 90 of our promising, so it seemed to us, military men were dismissed from one of our career academies for cheating in exams.....
...thousands of young people, in the early 50's -- even then -- became dope addicts....
...and have we not had to deal in recent years with statistics that in many communities there seemed to be more illegitimate births than there are legitimate births?

Accusation Number Four -- as we ask the question, what is wrong?

The world has perverted modern science until it has become a potential curse to mankind. I can remember when I began my ministry, reading the very astute observation of a man who was in a position to make it, as he dealt with our increased technology and scientific sophistication. He

lamented the fact: "We're not good enough to be so clever."
Dr. Lee DeForest, father of modern radio, so it has been said,
once complained to a broadcasting studio: "What have you done
with my child?" (meaning the thing that he helped create)

" . . . the radio was conceived as an
instrument for culture, for fine music, the uplifting of
America's mass intelligence. You have debased it, you
have made it a laughing-stock of intelligence -- surely
a stench in the nostrils of the gods of the air. The
occasional fine program is smeared with impudent insistence
to buy or to try! Murder mysteries rule the waves by
night, and children are rendered psychopathic by your
bedtime stories "

If that could be said of radio then and there, think of
the indictment that's being made, as well it should be,
from many quarters against television.

What's wrong? It's been wrong for a long time. Only some of us haven't
paid enough attention to it. We have been looking in different directions.
We have been afraid to face up to the basic issue. This damnable thing that's
known as relativity in morals -- in my notes I wrote more than a quarter of
a century ago that the then Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court
Vinson stated in an article that appeared in TIME Magazine: "Nothing is
more certain in modern society than the principle that there are no absolutes."
Did I not read some time ago that even in Minneapolis there was a want-ad ap-
pearing in one of their newspapers asking for an Assistant Manager in a
bowling alley who "must be fairly honest." - - that's how we've accommodated

ourselves to this damnable thing called relativity in morals.

A keynote speaker at a White House conference some years back observed: "Our civilization is a kindergarten trying to spell GOD with the wrong blocks." And that's our problem. For too long we've tried to live in this world without reference to the Creator. How can we live as we ought to live if we ignore the creative hand and mind of Almighty God? How can we live with one another if we have disregard and disrespect for the crowning glory of God's creation which is man? -- a human being -- where we exploit one another, and sacrifice the regard that we ought to have for human values because we want convenience and comfort, and to line our own pockets, and to swell our own profits.

What's been wrong? Too long we have ignored the fact of God. This is God's world. It was meant to run according to God's rules and God's regulations and God's principles. We find ourselves in the dilemma of the man who buys an appliance or a tool....something goes wrong, and as the wit says, "When all else fails, check out the book of instructions!" But in many quarters we've lost the book of instructions. We have any number of youngsters around us who can't even recite the Ten Commandments. If you can't even recite them, how do you know, then, what it is you're meant to obey and what it is you're meant to do?

I wish I could have remembered his name, I wish I could have been there when he said it. They tell me it was either a President of Yale or Harvard who a few years ago said, "The real test of a truly educated man is his willingness to speak the name of God, and to do it without embarrassment."

A visitor to the United States came, put his finger upon our spiritual pulse-beat, and left and said, "I think I've discovered something that the world has not known before -- a country, to all intents and purposes, that's ignoring God." This is what we have been saying to some of you across the years. God is the forgotten factor. The rank arrogance of man to think that he can run this world without reference to God!

But you say to yourself, and quickly, of course you do, But I'm trying to remember, I'm trying to keep my orientation correct -- that's why I come back here Sunday after Sunday. Of course you are. And that's why our Blessed Lord looked at people such as you and tried to tell them that the world is bad because people have gone bad. It's bad people who make a bad world. It's out of our heart these things come. And that's why we Christians have to press the case for being born again -- together a new heart. and a new mind to make a new world.

And that's why our Blessed Lord looked at people such as you and said, "You are the answer. For from within the heart of man comes evil." And our Blessed Lord could also say to us: "From within the heart of man comes good." The world is heading toward Hell -- it's meant to move in the direction of Heaven. Both forces are at work. You may have to decide momentarily as to which is getting the greater momentum these days.

I am being thrilled, I tell you, as I read anew in my personal devotions these days the Book of Revelation. And I am confronted by the somber truth that the wrath of God will come upon a world that's prone to destroy itself. But on the other hand, there is that marvelous segment of the twin truths that the triumph of good prevails. God always has the last word.

Edwin Markham, years ago, said: "Why build these cities glorious if man unbuilded goes? In vain we build the work unless the builder also grows."

Did I ever tell you the story about the youngster who was trying to

put together a jigsaw puzzle? The cover on the box said when it was finished it would come out as a picture of the universe. He had a great deal of trouble putting it together, until -- clever chap that he was -- he also discovered that it was one of those reversible puzzles -- there was a picture on the other side, and he put that one together. That picture happened to be the picture of a man. Get the man straight . . . and you'll get the world straight.

You say this is simplistic preaching? It is.

As I stand at the sacred desk I would remind you: be sensitive to what's wrong. Look for the answer in the right place. Another wit observed, and by this comment I would conclude the sermon - - "If you believe the world to be peopled with rascals -- then make it your business to see that there's one rascal less."

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"MARY OF MAGDALA"

O GOD, We make so little time for this sort of thing, to give some measure of undivided attention to the interpreting of Your Word. Now that we are about to do it, give us the smile of Your favor. In the Name of Jesus Christ, who when He came, came preaching. Amen.

John 7:51b

Today's sermon bears the title "Mary of Magdala." It's inspired by the Gospel for the day, this day which in the Calendar of the Church is known as St. Mary Magdalene Day.

Mary of Magdala, to use a common expression, has suffered from a bad press - - she's not always been given credit for what she so richly deserves. I am happy to tell you that as I stand at this sacred desk this morning, in my judgment she is one of the most remarkable women to be found in the entire New Testament. But she's not always appreciated as such.

....let me say it again and say it quickly, with the same degree of conviction by which it was said in the first place:
in my judgment she is one of the most remarkable of all women
to be found in the New Testament.

Now having said that, I want to tell you two things, and once I've said them I would encourage you to forget them at once.....

-- first, usually, in many quarters, Mary is thought of as a prostitute. It's a very unfortunate thing that some people have labels attached to them and they never quite get rid of them. I presume to the end of time there will be people who when they think of Mary of Magdala, will think of her as a harlot. You may find it very difficult, however, from Scripture, to justify such an unsavory reputation.

-- the second thing that I should tell you is that a Greek novelist some time ago wrote a book about her and referred to her as the lover of Jesus Christ, and perhaps his last and greatest temptation. That's what the mind of man can do when it has the freedom of imagination.

....now I would disabuse from your mind immediately both of these aspects, because I want to hasten at once to tell you why in my judgment that I think of her as one of the most remarkable of all women to be found in the New Testament.

It may be of some interest to you to know that there are six Marys that are mentioned in the New Testament. Four of them will come quickly to your mind undoubtedly....

- first is Mary, the mother of our Blessed Lord
- second is Mary, the mother of James the Less, one of the disciples who followed Jesus Christ
- the third Mary that may come quickly to your mind is the one who was the sister of a woman named Martha and of a man named Lazarus
- and then undoubtedly when you think of the Marys in the New Testament, you will think of Mary the Magdalen.

Now I am happy to tell you that properly understood, she is the woman out of whom Jesus cast seven demons. You may ask me, what was the nature of her illness? what was the nature of her disorder? I don't quite know. Maybe it was purely neurotic---maybe it was purely emotional. Maybe it was a case from birth of mental imbalance. But picture her as best you can as a tortured individual who was never quite herself. And at the slightest provocation, perhaps, would give this evidence of disorientation.

You have reason to believe that her parents and those who were near and dear

to her sought out ways and means by which she could be held. Presumably they tried everything. And then one day there came this itinerant preacher of whom people said, He had healing with His touch, and when He came to the general region of Galilee, He came to Magdala and had the encounter with Mary -- Jesus Christ the exorcist cast demons from her and makes her free.

What is this? Simply understood, it is Jesus Christ doing for her what she could not do for herself. It is Jesus Christ doing for her what no one else could have done for her. It is Jesus Christ setting her free to be the person she was meant to be in the sight of God.

Must I tell you this, that to all intents and purposes this is the kind of thing I have been trying to tell you in all the years that God has given me the privilege to be your pastor? Written large in everything that I've tried to tell you from this sacred desk is that once Jesus Christ touches a person's life, a change sets in and a person becomes what a person was meant to be in the sight of God. What we cannot do for ourselves, what other people cannot do for us -- only Jesus Christ can do. And you never really understand the Christian experience until you begin at that point -- coming under the influence of Jesus Christ and being set free, to be the happy and the sane and the fully integrated person that you were meant to be.

I can tell you this -- I shan't give you her name, and even if I did, 99 and 44/100th % of you wouldn't know her anyway. She's exceedingly precious to me because she was in my confirmation class in those early years when I came to you. I thought her spiritually sensitive. Then she was caught up with those surging 60's that left so many unsettled, and the gap set in . . . not exactly alienation from the church -- thank God there was always some measure of relationship that remained between her and me, for which I am profoundly grateful . . .

. . I remember that near-midnight call that I got from her, from a police station in Chicago, caught in one of the riots -- reaching

out to something that was part of her past that it
might hold her in good stead . . .

I saw her yesterday. Now she's in her early 30's. She didn't have to speak the words, it was all so self-evident -- there's a light in her eyes, her face is radiant. And then the words tumbled out so easily, so happily -- "Pastor, you should know, I've always known Jesus. But a short while ago I discovered Him all over again and He's touched my life."

....might as well hear her words,
you'd expect me to say them, but maybe they'll have greater
credibility when they come from one who had been there, who has
something to look forward to because she knows what she's looking
from - -

(now that's a turn-of-speech you ought to
cherish) - - knowing what you can look forward to
because you know what you're looking away from !)

She said, "Pastor, Jesus has made me whole."

Well, that is the Christian experience, and that's the point at which you begin, to be touched by Jesus Christ . . . and that was Mary of Magdala. That's where you begin when you think about her - - the woman out of whom Jesus cast these seven demons.

The second thing I can tell you about her is this: once this happened to her she didn't go off in a corner and know one continual day after another of self-congratulation - - "what a wonderful person I am -- this has happened to me!" But rather she went and associated herself with a group of people who had a similar experience.

One of the very precious passages in the Bible is the passage that when Jesus went about He was occasionally accompanied by a group of people in whom was found a number of women. There are always the women loyalists. Mary was

one of them.

Now, Mary needed to be there. They needed to have her keep telling them about what had happened to her, and in her association with them she needed to be reinforced, strengthened. There is no such thing as a solitary Christian. Once you become a Christian you're drawn naturally to other people who have this same wonderful experience, and you need one another to keep the experience from growing stale.

Do I have to tell you again as I've told some of you before, some of us keep coming back to this place because we need the very thing that some of you give to us, you provide us a measure of encouragement, you provide us a measure of inspiration. We need to be reminded of what Jesus Christ is doing in your life in order that we might be re-assured that it can happen to us! And as you don't lose it, we need to be reminded that we must not lose it.

Do I have to tell you again, my debt to many of you is very great. Any number of you make it easier for me to remain a Christian just because of what you bring into my life.

The third thing I can tell you about Mary is, when the end came, as far as Jesus Christ was concerned, she was there. I can't say that about any number of other people. He touched the lives of hundreds upon hundreds of people, and He did have such a thing as a disciple band. But the Scriptures say, "They forsook him and they fled." But Mary was there, in the shadow of the cross.

This is one reason that I refer to her as one of the most remarkable of all the women in the New Testament. Any number of people can support a winner. Any number of people desert when the ship begins to sink. You're not forgetting, are you, that Jesus Christ, hanging upon the cross, was branded a common criminal . . . at some risk Mary was there! . . . unashamedly, and faithfully so -- at some risk, from the human perspective. Why shouldn't I tell you this? I have reason to believe that Mary was attractive, I have reason to think that she was a beautiful woman. And I have reason to believe the legend that the

captain of the guard of the soldiers came and said, "You'd better leave, it's not safe for you to stay in this environment. This is a motley crew that's here! - - for your own personal safety I ask that you go."

...the record has it that she didn't go, legend or not. Mary stayed - - if not to give comfort to Mary the Mother of our Lord, then most certainly to give comfort to Jesus Christ, weakened by approaching death, hanging upon the cross.

One of the most remarkable of all women to be found in the New Testament -- so great her faithfulness. Faithful because she was eternally grateful. She remembered what He had done for her.

I suggest to you that one of the great moments in life is to be able to have eyes meet, that when those eyes meet, to read nothing but trust and respect and faithfulness. And that's the kind of thing I dare say happened when the eyes of Jesus Christ met the eyes of Mary the Magdalene.

The fourth thing that I can tell you about Mary is this: she was the first person to see the resurrected Christ. Faithfulness pays off, I tell you. It has its great reward. Think of it! The first person to behold the resurrected Christ -- this woman of whom I speak! -- whose praise I sing! -- as one of the most remarkable of all women in the New Testament.

There are some who say that there isn't anything in this world that is quite as wonderful as to hear your name called by someone you love. That was Mary's experience, that's the text that I read for you -- the 16th verse of the 20th chapter of the Gospel according to John. It was worth everything that she went through for that exceedingly precious moment when Jesus Christ would say, "Mary."

The thing that some of us covet for ourselves is perhaps that in the moment of death, to be able to have the Lord Jesus Christ call us by name and to give us the assurance that belongs to those who have persevered in faithfulness. Every

now and then you meet someone who epitomizes the total Christian experience.
Mary of Magdala, to all intents and purposes this morning, is Exhibit A.
Keep the halo on her head - - we need her kind.

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

" 1 - 2 - 3 of DISCIPLESHIP"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Mark 6: 6-13

Realistically speaking, it was a 1-2-3 affair. Let me explain.

Number One -- That day when the wandering preacher happened to come upon each of them, finally twelve in number, and looked them straight in the eye, as much as to say, "You're my man. From this time forth I've claimed you as my disciple. Come after me." . . . Number One. That's the way it happened, for there was that day when Jesus Christ personally chose the twelve.

Then there was a period of time set in that characterized Number Two, a period of three years when they walked with Him as He taught them, when they walked with Him as they observed Him -- preaching, teaching, performing miracles. When in that period of three years they identified with Him as Lord and Master.

Really now, a 1-2-3 affair.

-- Number 1 -- the day each was chosen.

-- Number 2 -- the period of time that elapsed when they were
in the training period.

...the orientation now was over, the shake-down cruise had been established. Number Three was ahead. They had been saying to themselves, undoubtedly, "How soon do you think it will be until the Master launches us? How soon do you think it will be until we're out there pretty much on our own? He did call us to be His disciples, and then He set us apart to be His apostles -- as people who would be sent forth, given a particular assignment."

Well, that day is remembered now in the Gospel that was read by Alice a short while ago. You all know the high regard that I have for the King James

translation. But for our purpose this morning let me read it anew the way J.B. Phillips has put it. You will find it recorded as the 6th chapter of the Gospel according to Mark:

"Then he made his way round the villages, continuing his teaching. He summoned the twelve, and began to send them out in twos, giving them power over evil spirits. He instructed them to take nothing for the road except a staff -- no bread, no satchel and no money in their pockets. They were to wear sandals and not to take more than one coat. And he told them,

'Wherever you are, when you go into a house, stay there until you leave that place. And wherever people will not welcome you or listen to what you have to say, leave them and shake the dust off your feet as a protest against them!'

So they went out and preached publicly that men should change their whole outlook. They expelled many evil spirits and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them."

.....1 - 2 - 3 -- that's the way the third chapter began. First He called them. Secondly, they stayed with Him for three years. And then thirdly, He said, "You scatter -- you go! You assume the responsibility that I now give to you."

Human as they were, I'm going to suggest that first off, there was some measure of reassurance. They were delighted to hear that they didn't have to go by themselves, that is, each man by himself. It's always a lot easier sometime if you can have somebody by your side to support you, to give you the necessary strength and reassurance that you may need. And I suppose the immediate reaction was a measure of delight - - "Good, I won't have to go by myself."

But then I'm also wondering, human as they were, if some degree of consternation did not take over, when upon reflection they said to themselves, each in turn, "I wonder to whom I'll be assigned? If I have to go with So-and-so, I'm not so sure I want to go. It's already obvious that when we have our discussions we clash, our personalities just don't mesh. And to think that I'd have to undertake an assignment with that person! Well, you know human nature,

of course you do. And there was the likelihood that that was the way it could have happened.

But I'm not so sure, because I'm willing to give my Master far more credit for the three years that He spent with them. Surely in that time of three years He marked indelibly upon the fabric of their souls the meaning of commitment, the meaning of service, of placing a priority of the thing that had to be done just because it had to be done, and not to allow any other factors to interfere.

Why did they call Him Lord and Master if it didn't mean that they were willing to give Him the measure of obedience that He deserved? His very integrity commanded their respect. And as I read the pages of the New Testament, over and over again I am increasingly impressed with how that element of authority surfaces again and again and again. There is no question about it as to who is in charge! And there was no question on their part as to why they should obey Him, or not obey Him. So I am inclined to think that you can discredit what I have offered you as the very quick interlude, that they may have had their moments when they became uneasy and unsettled as to the kind of person with whom they may have been linked. So they went out two by two. This was their assignment.

Upon reflection you need to recognize that you never really appreciate the meaning of Christian discipleship until you see yourself as a person who is under assignment. First He called these people to be with Him, to be with Him, to identify with Him, to catch His spirit, to observe the way He handles things, to receive the power and the strength that only He could give them. Then, He said, the time has come when you must go. No Christian ever really knows the meaning of discipleship until he sees himself as a person under orders. Now this day had come....

...3 follows 2, and 2 follows 1. 1-2-3. Now You're on assignment. Every Christian must see himself as on assignment, commissioned, and on serious business...and nothing is to interfere with that

assignment.

I suppose from a human perspective, if we wanted to, we could say one of the disciples may have said, "Would you mind running that through again! Did I understand you correctly? We travel lightly -- without baggage -- the only coat we take is the coat we're wearing?

...we have no money?

...we take no food? - - - "

And Jesus probably said, "Yes, you understood me correctly. That's absolutely right! You're not to concern yourselves with these things -- you're on serious business! You've got to give it the priority that becomes it. You're to have this obsession that nothing absolutely is more important than the assignment on which I now send you. You must trust me -- all your needs will be taken care of. The only worry that you have is that you do not fail your assignment."

I shudder when I think how lightly many of us have taken our assignment. I shudder when I think how easily we take this whole business of Christian discipleship. We take it almost as lightly as a friend of mine who had a boat and what do you suppose he named it? -- SERIOUS BUSINESS -- he could have his secretary say truthfully when somebody called: "Where is he?" - - "He's out on Serious Business." Sometimes that's the way it is with us as Christians -- meant to be let loose in this world on serious business, we are relaxing and making light of it all.

I have mixed feelings about facing my Maker in the time of Judgment. I should be very happy indeed if He could say to me as He said to others: "Well done, thou good and faithful servant" . . . but I'm not so sure that my faithfulness is that great. For I, too, am a person under orders and on serious business, and when I think how on occasion I have given people a gentle pat on the back and said, "Everything's quite alright!" -- when I should have sat down and confronted that person with the basic things that really matter most. In so many of our inter-personal relationships, how we skirt the issue and never

really treat some things as seriously as they ought to be treated.

Why do I say this? It is very, very important that you recognize how this text goes. When He sent them out He did not send them out primarily to preach and to teach....when He sent them out He did not send them out primarily to enjoy good fellowship with one another. That's maybe why He said, "You stay in one place -- you don't just flip and flop from one house to another."

I shudder, in the time of Judgment, when my Lord will take me to task and say -- "Again and again I put you in a particular situation, where in my name, you could have spoken to that person -- seriously -- and you were either afraid to do it or you shied away from it for any number of other reasons."

He gave them power to go out into the world to free it from unclean spirits. You begin at that point. The mission is a serious one, for the simple reason that they were sent out into a world that is basically evil. It is a wicked world, it is a world that's heading toward Hell. But God did not make His world to go to Hell. God says, "I will stem the tide -- I will change the drift -- and you are the ones who are going to do it."

But you see, we become so conditioned to the world that any number of us refuse to believe that it's as wicked as all that. Part of their responsibility was to lie in the fact that they would say to a person, "You are not whole, you are not clean, you are evil." Some of us say we don't want to be that judgmental.....but some of us are insensitive to evil because we have never really appreciated the good. In Bernard Shaw's play "Doctor Cannoek" (?) there is a line in which the physician says, "If you say that you are well, it's only because you do not know that you are sick." There are some people who are reluctant to go to a physician because they are afraid that the diagnosis that he may make -- they do not want to be told that they are not well. And yet there are some people who will damn a physician because he did not make the necessary diagnosis -- he could have been in a position to tell them what was wrong, and he gave them sugar-coated pills.

I have my moments when I smile when I think on that trip around the world, when I picked something up -- was it in -- most certainly in India -- and when I was limping along they took me to the mission hospital in Kathmandu. And the mission doctor took one look at me and he said, "You're sick!" "...and what else is new, doctor?" But to his credit, he began at that point and was able to do something because he could begin at that point. Jesus sent His disciples out to diagnose the ill of the world which is evil, which alienation from God, willful disobedience, failing to recognize the priority that belongs to God. The net result is always evil.

We belong to a tradition that constantly reminds us that we are by nature sinful and unclean. God gave to His disciples the authority and the power by which to allow people to believe that we can be rid of evil -- it is absolutely possible. And that's the last thing that you and I would allow God to use us to accomplish. We will lament, we will complain - - but to allow God to use us as His agents, to free people from the evil influence - - -

Go back and read that 6th chapter of Mark again, put yourself in that position -- where Jesus Christ is saying, "Now, you go, you help rid the world of evil - - I give you that authority, I give you that power."

....but I caution you -- He gave it only to those who

had been with Him. For you cannot give what you do not have . . .

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"OUR UNDISCOURAGEABLE GOD"

QUIET our minds and hush our hearts,
O God, and make us ready to give some
measure of undivided attention to the
preaching of your Word, through Jesus
Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, Who when He
came, came preaching. Amen.

Luke 15:1

And who do you suppose the people were who came to hear Him preach? The 15th chapter of the Gospel according to Luke, in its first verse, answers that question for us:

"And then drew near to hear him all the
publicans and the sinners."

They were in reality the flotsam and the jetsam of life. They were not a very attractive group of people, they were the outcasts and the disadvantaged. In fact, ~~as~~ I was preparing this sermon it occurred to me that maybe I'd be better off if I turned my back upon Saint Luke today and took this text, which has been afire in my soul, and gone down into the District of Columbia, into the inner city, and standing there on some street corner I'd wait until the dredges of humanity came by. And then I'd say to them: "I have a message for you. I stand in the tradition of one who when He came, came preaching, and came preaching to people such as you!"

For as I was preparing this sermon I thought I could see how Peter, James and John, each in turn turning to one another probably said, "Did you hear what the Master said underneath his breath as He stood up to face these people!"

...a motley crew they were who came to hear Him.....

Peter, James and John, that close-knit group, turning one to another, asking the question: "Did you hear what I heard? -- Jesus saying underneath His breath, as He looked at these people -- I heard Him say: 'These people are hurting, they have been done in by life -- they're the bruised ones, and the bloodied ones, and

the battered ones.'" "

You haven't been done in by life, have you? You look as though life has treated you fairly well. When have you last done battle against the forces that would have done you in? You look as though you've come along very nicely, honestly you do. But is that true? Any person, it seems to me, who has reached the age of forty has discovered by that time that life has a way of doing some of us in. There are always pitfalls ahead, and some of us haven't been able to skirt them by the time we reach forty or forty-five. Life, my friend, does have a way of doing us in, and no matter how you characterize it, any number of people you have met along the way of life are somewhat battered and bruised and bloodied by the time they reach their fifth or sixth decade. I'm not so sure that anyone has really begun to live until he shows some evidence of a skirmish here and a skirmish there. Now some are able to face it. Many cannot face it.

I think we suffer for two reasons, either because of our own stupidity and folly, making us vulnerable to the blows of life, or because we're caught up in the circumstances of life over which we have no control, and these forces do us in.

Some of us are like sheep who go astray -- never quite intending to go astray. We nibble and we nibble at that blade of grass, figuratively speaking, and before we know it we're out in the wilderness. And then we discover how life can do us in.

Some people find themselves in the wilderness because they're like a willful goat that deliberately makes the decision to go where the wild oats are....and thoroughly enjoys every bit of it. But when a person is lost in the wilderness, as a wise man once observed, the price that he pays is pretty much the same, whether he got there innocently or deliberately. There is still a price to be paid.

Our Blessed Lord looked over these people, the flotsam and the jetsam of

life, and He said to Himself, "They're hurting....life has done them in.

And then He told them three perfectly beautiful stories -- as wonderful a chapter as you'll find in the entire Gospel according to Luke aside from the nativity story, is this 15th chapter. He dealt with a trilogy....

...first He told them the story about a man who was a shepherd and had a hundred sheep, and one of them went astray. He wasn't content to have 99 on his hands. He went looking, that shepherd did, for the one that was lost and he kept looking until he found it! For his love was that undiscourageable. He did not give up.

...then Jesus told the second of the stories in the trilogy, about a woman who had ten coins and she lost one of them....and she kept looking, as the Scriptures say, until she found it -- she did not give up! She was that undiscourageable.

.....and then the last story is the poignant of all. Jesus told about a man who had two sons . . . and the one, with all the willfulness that characterizes rebellious youth, got fed up with home and prevailed upon his father to let him go. And so the father let the son go. You know how the story reads -- he spent his life in dissipation. . . .

...all the while he was gone the old man, bent by the years, went to the end of the lane, night after night, trying to peer down the horizon to see if there wasn't some form he could recognize as his son who had turned his back on him . . . night after night the old man went and stood and looked and looked and looked. And then one night, this man whose love was characterized as being undiscourageable, never giving up, thought he saw something. And it was he, the returning son, now with the blush of youth gone from his cheeks, his years wasted. But still his son. And you know the rejoicing and the merry-making that followed. And all because the father's love was undiscourageable -- he never gave up.

When Jesus came preaching, He came to these people to tell them that His love for them remained constant. And while they may be tempted to give up on life because of the way life had dealt them in, Jesus said, "I have not given up on you." He looked upon them perhaps as a physician walks out from his office into the waiting room and sees all the people there, and the thing that they want to hear most from the physician is that there is hope. And that's why they go to physicians, don't they? -- honestly believing that their situation can be made better.

And this is why, with affection, some of us refer to Jesus Christ as the Good Physician, for His love is undiscourageable. And love always wins the day. Love always says to us, there is the possibility that tomorrow can be better. You don't have to be dealt in.

When I was a student in Gettysburg Seminary I was fortunate to have as my mentor Harvey Daniel Hoover, a man who perhaps more than any other person helped to teach me what a wonderful thing it is to be a pastor and to share the love of God with people and never to sit in judgment upon them. Again and again out of his own life he would turn and bring this episode before us. He told how when he was young, he was beginning his ministry, he was in the Chicago area. And part of his ministry was to a group of people who lived in the Red Light section of Chicago . . .

. . . and a prostitute had died. She had been a prostitute for a number of years, he was told. They gave him the plain unvarnished facts -- you know they can do that! " . . we can't find a preacher to conduct the service -- would you do it for her?" He agreed.

.....and then he laid bare his soul to us and told us how the temptation came to him to lay those people low, and to talk about the wrath of God -- to preach hellfire, brimstone and damnation. But

then it occurred to him that he didn't have to tell those people about Hell -- they were living in it! He didn't have to tell those people about the wages of sin -- they had been paying the wages of sin! So he chose as his text the greatest verse in the New Testament:

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

...he introduced them to the Saviour who personifies the undiscourageable love of God -- a God who never gives up on us.

But you and I have our moments when we're prone to give up on life, and you and I have our moments when we're prone even to give up on God.

Let me read this for you now, lest you succumb to such philosophy that can do you in -- the French soldiers used to say this during the war:

" . . . You may be mobilized, or you may not be mobilized

-- if you are not mobilized, nothing matters;

-- if you are ~~not~~ mobilized, one of two things happens:

either you are sent up to the front, or you are not sent up to the front

-- if you are not sent up to the front, nothing matters;

-- if you are sent up to the front, one of two things happens:
you are sent into the firing line, or you are not sent into the firing line

-- if you are not sent into the firing line, nothing matters;

-- if you are sent into the firing line, one of two things happens: you are hit, or you are not hit.

-- if you are not hit, nothing matters;

-- if you are hit, one of two things happens:
you are dangerously wounded, or you are not dangerously wounded

-- if you are not dangerously wounded, nothing matters;

-- if you are dangerously wounded, one of two things happens:
you die, or you do not die.

-- if you do not die, nothing matters;

-- if you die . . . nothing matters.

Some subscribe to this kind of philosophy, that life has a way of dealing the bad and difficult blow. You pay your money, you take your choice, my friend.

To the contrary, let me read for you a brave woman's message. I'll give you her own words:

"I should never have started to write if I had not been paralyzed down one side for three years, and unable to do anything but write. I should never have learned to walk again if I had not formed the habit of rolling out of bed whenever I was left alone, hanging on to the foot rail with one hand, dragging myself up, and dragging myself along it, for what seemed like miles, until I got to the end. And I should never have done the most exciting thing I ever did in my life if I had not been told that I would never get well again, and so bundled myself on a sailing ship. They said I should never be out in the hot sun, or chance getting a chill, or eat meat, or drink coffee. Yet I slept on a deck (?) of necessity, until I was blistered by the sun. For breakfast, dinner and supper I had salt beef or salt pork, fried potatoes and black coffee. And I was never so well in my life!"

When life deals us the bad blow, one can give in to it . . . or one cannot give in to it. But through the corridors of time comes Jesus Christ, constantly saying to us, "I have loved you with an everlasting love -- I will never leave you, I will never forsake you. Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end."

This is what Jesus Christ is always saying to us. Tomorrow can be better, and to that end God gives Himself to us through His Holy Spirit, to enable us, to empower us. This is the philosophy of life that grips my soul -- He wants me to keep on living to the very day that I die.

I want to read a true story for you -- it comes out of the history of Tennessee:

"An Indian band had raided a pioneer settlement, and after murdering nearly everybody had carried off some little boys with them into the forest. Years passed, and in a skirmish with the Indians some of their warriors were taken prisoners, among them a few men with faces almost white . . . "

(Now I should tell you that all the time that skirmish
had run its course, there were two mothers who never
gave up believing that some day their little boys who
had been taken prisoner years ago might be released)

The commanding officer of the troops that had done battle with the Indians and had taken them captive was aware of this. And so he lined up these Indians and these faces that were near-white and called the two mothers, and said, "Could it be that one of these whose face is near-white could be your child of the other year, when they were taken captive? Look and see."

So the two mothers went up and down the line, peering into the faces of these Indians and those who were near-white, hoping and praying that perhaps there would be a response, but there was none.

And then, God bless the commanding officer -- he came up with a happy thought. He said to one of the mothers, "Did you ever sing to your children a lullaby when they were young? Think now!" And immediately one of the mothers burst into singing, crooning a lullaby that she had sung for her children years ago . . . went up and down that line singing that lullaby. And as she came to one of them, he began singing the same lullaby with her.

You want a picture of God -- God walking up and down this line of battered, bruised and bloodied humanity singing a song of love. And when you and I respond to the same chord, life is renewed and life is restored, and you and I have reason to want to go on living.

Let me close with these words that need no further comment, hoping perhaps that it might be your response to life as well:

" . . I would not have my life be one of bliss,
Untouched by heartache, agony, despair --
A pale, anemic thing. My nightly prayer
Is that with each new day I shall not miss
High venturings, nor undeserve the hiss
Of envious human moles who never dare
To touch off rockets in their souls and flare
Above their deepening grooves. O grant me this:
That I shall scale life's peaks, explore its glooms,
Know mountained ecstasies, deep-valleyed pains --
That when my last red sands by Time are sieved
And life has struck my sinews from her looms,
I shall have earned three words o'er my remains
Beside was 'born' and 'died' -- between 'he lived.'"

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"HOW TO FACE A PROBLEM"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

John 6:5

The Lessons were read exceptionally well. Do you remember now the third Lesson that he read for us, the Gospel for the day? For some of us when we look back and think of our days in childhood, it was a favorite passage in the Scripture because it dealt with Jesus performing a great miracle. And to this very day when we think of the miracles that Jesus performed, the Feeding of the Five Thousand for some of us comes soonest to mind. For whatever reason it may be, it left its impression upon us -- feeding five thousand people!

Maybe it made its impression upon us in the days of our childhood because a youngster figured largely in the performance of that miracle -- a boy who brought his lunch along, attracted to Jesus Christ.

Now we have to get this in proper perspective, of course we do. There was the multitude. Jesus Christ, the miracle-worker, the great preacher, as the record says: "Seeing them, had compassion upon them." And before anybody else was aware of the problem, it was Jesus Christ who recognized that something had to be done for these people. And so He turned to His disciples and said, "Where are we going to buy bread, that they may eat?"

-- that's the text. It's the 6th chapter according to John,
the 5th verse.

Get it in perspective, my friend. Life always has a way of throwing some problem in front of us, I don't care what your age may be.

I look back occasionally to think of all the folly of my life, and the ways I reacted so stupidly to certain things. I still share with you with a measure of chagrin how embarrassed I am to admit to you that it wasn't until recently

that I permitted myself to believe that life could reach a kind of plateau, where perhaps you would reach a certain age in life and you would have it made as far as problems would be concerned. How foolish can one be!

Among the lessons that life has taught me is this: that you simply exchange one set of problems for another. In making hospital calls yesterday I came upon her, God bless her -- in her 90th year, or even beyond that -- having fallen and fractured her hip, tortured by pain . . . and as much as to say to me, "Pastor, to think that I have to have this! Nobody knows how painful it is, Pastor!" At 90-some years of age, to have a problem like that!

Life is never without its problems. And I suppose if it were given to me to try to impress upon people a true reading of life, at whatever age it would be, I think I would begin at that point. Let's assume that there are difficulties ahead, crises that will have to be met, problems that will have to be faced. It was a wise man who once said to his daughter -- wherever you go, begin with the premise that there will be problems.

There are some problems we create for ourselves.....there are some problems that other people create for us.....there are other things that constitute problems over which people themselves seem to have no control. But problems they remain.

Now what to do in the face of a problem? This Gospel Lesson for today speaks magnificently to this very thing: "How To Face A Problem" -- this could be the title for this sermon. Well you begin, I suppose, by recognizing that a problem exists. Some of us almost tear our hair out at times when we have to deal with people who allow themselves to be absolutely insensitive to the fact that a problem exists. They are ostrich-like. They pretend that the problem isn't there. And all the while they're beset by the fact that a problem exists.

-- you'll never solve a problem until you first recognize that the problem is there. And happy indeed is that person who is so gifted

that he can sort out the issues and recognize what is basic...because some of us, when we have to do battle with a problem, do a lot of shadow-boxing, and we really never come quite to grips with the problem that really is there.

Maybe in order to recognize the fact that we have a problem, we need to look at it through the divine lens of God. You'll notice according to this Gospel lesson that Jesus Christ was first aware of the problem. Before any of the disciples came and said, "What are we going to do, Master?" -- it was Jesus Christ who took the initiative and said, "Here is a problem."

I wonder how many people there are in this congregation who when they come to church on a given Sunday morning, turn their back upon this altar and become more sensitive to the problems of the world, because in and through the experience that we share here, through the God-perspective we are made sensitive to problems that exist. It was Jesus Christ who took the initiative and said: "You have a problem on your hands."

But calling a problem by name is never enough, and some people there are who begin at that point -- yes they will. And that's where they will stop. They spend all of their time and energy just lamenting the fact that there's a problem in front of them. I once had a friend who gave me a good bit of advice. He said, "When you have a problem on your hands, be careful with whom you talk -- because you may find yourself simply talking with people who will rehearse for you and with you the characteristics of the problem, and they won't help you one point beyond that!"

I find this to be true quite frequently in my relationship with people when I am concerned about the burdens of the world -- I find that so often all that I am doing is simply rehearsing in their presence, and they're rehearsing in my presence the lament of the burden of the world. But there has to be something beyond that. It is never enough just to call the problem by name -- you begin at that point, but you don't stop at it.

What's the next step? The next step is to recognize that there could be something that you could do about it. Another bit of advice that I share with you for what it may be worth is: always try to make yourself more a part of the answer than of the problem. And so our Blessed Lord turned to the disciples and said, to all intents and purposes: "What are you going to do about it? --

-- what are you going to do about it?"

Don't look to somebody else. What have you to contribute? There is always some point at which you can begin.

I am somewhat transparent when I come to this sacred desk, as you know, and let you see the inside of my soul on occasion. Only once in my life did I find myself as a Christian using the word hopeless, and that's when, fifteen years ago, I went out to India on that special assignment. Usually I survey a situation and think there is some point at which I could begin and make some kind of a dent. Well, with 90% of the people living in villages, and practically all of the villagers disadvantaged, I found myself on occasion using the word hopeless. I hardly knew where to begin to make a dent.

I know that's not the answer, because I did have marvelous relationships with missionaries who went out there, who didn't succumb to that philosophy. They gave themselves so wholeheartedly to making a significant contribution. But every now and then you and I face the problem and we say it's hopeless...and we don't know where to begin -- but with God there's always a point at which a person can begin. And that's exactly what Jesus Christ was saying: "How many loaves do you have? Where are you going to find bread?"

Now I'm happy to tell you that having introduced that element, one of the disciples was sensitive enough to the fact that there was a youngster before them who had a lunch. But that's all he had! -- just a lunch.....five thousand people to be fed. He was pleased, perhaps, that he could say, "Here's a boy with something" . . . but then he ruined it completely by introducing the negative,

cynical aspect by saying -- "But what's that among so many?"

Now, this is our syndrome, this is characteristic of many of us: we down-grade what we have. We don't think that we could make a difference, the little that we have to offer is so insignificant. And yet Jesus Christ was able to perform this miracle because He could begin with what the little boy had, and out of the little there came a lot.

But what needs to be said above all else is that when you and I are about to face a problem and hope to have it resolved, the better way to have it resolved is always to do what we do out of obedience to Jesus Christ. There may be many answers to solving a problem, but there is always a divine perspective that ought to be introduced.

I've lived long enough to know that there are moments when some of us could lose our sanity when we're perplexed by the problems of life. Some of us are that sensitive, we really are. But then, thanks be to God, we have our moments when God takes over and God allows us to believe that He's never given up on us, and God allows us to believe that there is a way and that His wisdom can be made available to us, if only when we act we act out of response to His will. You may not always know it, but we are, as His followers, in duty bound to seek His wisdom -- and within our human frailty to perform them as best we can.

Whenever I've gone to London I've thoroughly enjoyed going by the House of Commons, for a number of different reasons. I remember once I was quite intrigued by going to the different desks and finding there how the members of the House of Commons would doodle. And quite contrary to their rules and regulations, I picked up some time ago for mementoes that I like to keep from travels some of the doodling that was done by the House of Commons. I introduced this element for this simple reason, that years ago -- I've forgotten what the issue was -- a very serious problem had to be resolved by the House of Commons.....they seemed to have been at a stalemate. But then, thinking of the human factor, God used one person in

particular -- who stood up, at the right moment, and said the right thing in the right way.....and the issue was met.

After it was over several members of the House of Commons came to the desk of this man, used by God in that remarkable way, to see what it was that he had written on the piece of paper. And all they could find was: two words -- in Latin -- which simply meant "Give light . . . give light . . . enlighten me . . ."underscored - - - sensitive to the need to seek divine wisdom, he made himself available to God, who was able to use him.

That's the way miracles happen, my friend. Miracles always happen when we let go, with whatever it is that we have, and ask God to take over. But remember this: God, to all intents and purposes, doesn't take over until we first let go! And all too many of us want the burden of the miracle to be solely in the hands of God. Even God cannot make Antonio Stradivari's violins without Antonio!

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"TO PRAY - IN JESUS' NAME"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

John 16: 23-24

The word had gotten out that it would be, in all likelihood, the last session that Jesus would have with His disciple band. You may remember that Christ was here on special assignment, He'd spent three years attracting followers, recruiting them, indoctrinating them and making them ready for the investment that He would make in them as the future would unfold. The three years have come and gone. Now this was the last night that He would spend with them, and as He was wont to do, to talk about some of the things that really mattered most.

Have you any idea, my friends, what it was that He talked about the last night that He spent with His disciples? You are aware, aren't you, that on occasion He would bring them together and discuss certain things with them? Well, listen carefully now as I read the text for you. It may give you some idea. It's the 23rd and the 24th verses of the 16th chapter of the Gospel according to John:

"Verily I say to you, whatever you shall ask the Father in my name, He will give it to you. Hitherto you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you shall receive . . ."

There you have it. To all intents and purposes, as He gathered them together He said -- let me suggest that you think of it in these terms:

"I may not be able to talk with you again about this,
but I do want to talk to you now, of all things, about
your prayer life!"

....this sounds a bit crass, but I'm making bold to suggest that He might just as well have said to them - - "You haven't made the most of it -- it isn't really productive. I give you the privilege to pray, and you have not been praying

aright!"

As a Pastor, I hear people say two things about their prayer life:

One -- I hear people say on occasion: "It was the answer to prayer, Pastor, it really was! I prayed, and God heard my prayer. And as long as I live I'll thank Him!" . . . some people can be that enthusiastic about their prayer life.

On the other hand, there are people who come to me and quite honestly say, "Pastor, I believe in prayer, and I pray and I pray, but -- "and then they indicate that nothing happened.

There are the two schools of thought -- one group of people, very enthusiastic, and as long as they live they'll thank God for what happened when they prayed -- it came out exactly the way they wanted it to. They have no complaints, and life will be a constant hallelujah because what they've prayed for, in their language, they got it.

On the other hand, there are people who complain that while they believe in prayer, they prayed, but their prayers were not productive. Now what can one say?

As over against that, let's turn to Mark Twain and his Huckleberry Finn. You may remember that beloved character talking about his friend, Miss Watson. Said Huckleberry Finn: "Miss Watson, she took me in the closet and prayed, but nothing came of it. She told me to pray every day, whatever I asked for, I would get it. But it weren't so! I tried it -- once I got a fishline, but no hooks. I tried for the hooks, three or four times, but somehow I couldn't make it work. By-and-by one day I asked Miss Watson to try for me, and she said I was a fool. She never told me why, and I couldn't make it out no way. I sat down one time in the woods and I had a long think about it....I says to myself, 'If a body can get anything they pray for, why don't Deacon Wynn get back the money he lost on pork? -- why can't the Widow get back her silver

snuff box that was stolen? . . . so, I says to myself, there ain't nothing to it!"

...that's Huck Finn for you. And while you and I may smile, we must admit that here and there it's been our experience, too. For we take the words of Jesus at face value:

"Verily, verily I say to you, whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, He will give it to you. Hitherto you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you shall receive."

After all, Scripture does say: "Seek and ye will find, knock and it will be opened unto you - - ask and it will be given . . . " And we take that part of Scripture, put it off in a corner all by itself, and we concentrate on it. But our Blessed Lord, in that last night that He spent in this kind of conversation with His disciples, lowered the boom on them. He said, "I believe that you pray - - " (let me interpret it for you this way) - - "I believe that you pray, that's not my quarrel with you. I know that you're praying people. But let me tell you this," said Jesus, "You're not praying aright! You're not getting the answers to your prayer that you ought to be getting! And the reason? - - you're not praying in the right way, you're not praying in My name!" Now there you have it.

Says Jesus Christ, as He gives us this kind of encouragement, "Remember, if your prayers are to be answered, they must be the kind of prayers that I would pray."

According to the old Hebrew, this word name means: basic nature and character. And every time you and I pray, we are in duty bound to pray according to the mind and spirit of Jesus Christ. We ought to pray the way He would pray. He gave us this pattern for praying.

I suggest to you that you and I never really see Jesus Christ until we first see Him as a man-of-prayer. I've told you this before. You must never simply see Him as a great preacher....you must never simply see Him as a miracle-

worker. But Jesus Christ, who came to us to be our Saviour, was essentially a man-of-prayer. They were perfectly aware of the fact how productive prayer was for Him. Now He's telling them why prayer was not productive in their lives.

What a tragedy -- to think they had spent three years with Him, to think that for three years they had the glorious opportunity of having their prayers answered.....but to no avail. "Hitherto you have not received because you have not prayed in my name."

This is a hard lesson for some of us to learn. We pray, alright, and we believe in prayer. But there's always the problem of unanswered prayer. And here Jesus Christ says to us as His modern-day disciples: "Here's the trouble -- you're not praying in my name."

Paul Scherer, a prince of the pulpit some 40 - 30 years ago, once sat down in church, instead of being at the sacred desk as his custom was, to preach, but he sat where some of you would be sitting. He sat in church and tried to envision as best he could the kind of prayers that were going up to Heaven from the people round about him. And knowing some of the people as he did, he made bold to think in the terms in which some of them would be praying. I can't recall the exact words for you . . .

...but there was the prayer of a person who was being disappointed in love. He knew that. And he knew the burden of that man's prayer was, "O God, make her love me . . . O God, make her respond to my overtures . . ."

...there was the man, as he knew him, as Paul Scherer recalls, who had that difficult problem with his leg:

"O God, heal my leg! O God, make me walk! . . ."

The conclusion to which Paul Scherer came was that almost all of these prayers were pretty much self-centered -- wanting God to do something for each one of them, and without much concern for anybody else! Small wonder, then, when

Christians come to pray, they're in duty bound to take seriously the admonition of Jesus Christ, who said, "But if you want your prayers to be answered, they have to be offered in my name." And when you offer a prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, you're keeping before you the basic nature and character of Jesus Christ, the basic nature and character of God. There are some things God will not give us because they are contrary to His will. There are some things that God cannot give us, because they are not true to His nature.

What is the basic nature and character of God?

He is a just God, and a God who tries to deal fairly with all of us.

He is a good God, and as a good God, when He deals with us He wants to deal with us for our good.

He's the God who is wise, who sees beyond the present moment. And because He is a wise God, there are some things that He would withhold from us in order eventually to give us a greater blessing.

He is infinite...we are finite. And that, too, is part of our problem, because we'll never be able to figure out completely to our own satisfaction the mind of God. And we can't always be certain of His will. That's why when we pray, we pray in faith, and according to the mind and spirit of Jesus Christ.

Let me say it to you again: because we are human, so frequently when we pray, we pray because of our selfish interests. It can't be otherwise, we are that human. Would I surprise you a bit if I were to tell you quite earnestly that I'm not sure that there's anything on the shelf in the store-house of Heaven itself that has just your name and only your name on it! I don't know that there's anything that God wants to give only to me! For whatever it is that God gives, He gives that we might use to the good of somebody else! The nature and character of God is essentially love....and love was never meant to be selfish. It's the nature and character of love to share.

In company with many of you I have gone through this route as a father, and especially when a teenager, either of our two boys at that period of life, would come to me and while you may fault me for this, I do remember how on occasion when they would ask for a five-dollar bill, I would find myself saying, "And what do you plan to do with it?"

I think God has His moments when you and I storm the gates of Heaven, beseeching Him for a particular blessing, when He's inclined to search our souls and to probe our minds and to say, "And what will you do with it?"

- - take the person who is ill, the person who is diseased -- who honestly and surely with the utmost of understanding prays to get well - - who wouldn't pray for that kind of thing, all other things being equal?but did it ever occur to you that incorporated in that prayer should be: "Make me well, O God, that I may serve You better - - ""Make me well, O God, that Your purpose in my life may be better fulfilled --" ...sometimes that's the last thing that you and I think about. What we want we want for ourselves. It's all so understandable! And yet God says there are some things you're not going to get because in His infinite wisdom He's not so sure that He can trust us with them. We may use them for selfish purposes.

It's a frightening thing, to be given this privilege of praying, and to know that we might not be able to use it aright. Perhaps one of the most wonderful prayers that you and I can ever learn to pray is "Teach me how to pray -- teach me how to make the most of this privilege that You give to me, O God."

I'm numbered among those, fortunate ones, I dare say, for whom prayer has always been a very precious thing. Please indulge me when I tell you this -- I can't remember a time in my life when prayer was not real to me. But that doesn't mean that I've been without my problems as far as praying is concerned. I've had my moments when I have prayed and prayed and prayed....and the answer never came as I hoped it would. It's a very serious thing.

I'm constrained to tell you this. When the burden was more than I could carry, I came down from that parish where I was serving in Pennsylvania to Gettysburg, to meet with my mentor, the Rev. Dr. Harvey Daniel Hoover. I laid bare my soul, I told him my burden.

After we had talked quite earnestly, he said, "Well, we'd better pray." We got down on our knees, and he said, "You pray first." And I did. And then he prayed. And one of the most effective lessons in praying I learned from him that day, for he surprised me the way he concluded his prayer -- I can recall the words as though I heard them just a moment ago . . .

"Dear God in Heaven, if you can't hear the
prayer of your servant Raymond, and if you
can't hear the prayer that I'm offering for
him, then, Dear God, Father of our Lord
Jesus Christ, hear the prayer that Jesus
Christ is offering in his behalf."

We never really know how to pray until we pray the way Jesus prayed. And that's the last thing that some of us want to do. Really now. Because when we begin to pray the way He prayed, we have to get ourselves off of dead-center . . . and that's not very easy!

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"BORN-AGAIN"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

John 3:1-12

These are the verses from the Good Book that you need to hear now as this sermon is about to be preached, recorded in the third chapter of the Gospel according to John:

"There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God, for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.
Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.
Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?
Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.
Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.
Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be?
Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things? Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness. If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe if I tell you of heavenly things? . . . "

Tell me now, how would you react if at this point in the sermon I did a very unconventional thing, and I walked from the pulpit and stood alongside of you and stared you straight in the eye and said, "Are you born again?" - - ? There are people who do this, you know. I've had it done to me, and I'd be less than honest

if I didn't tell you that sometimes it riles me a bit and irritates me -- not so much that the question should be put, but by the manner in which the question is being asked.

There are some folks who with a degree of arrogance as though they are about to be judgmental, hoping indeed that I would say, "I don't know." -- and then they could parade in front of me the satisfaction that they know, because they're telling the whole world that they're born again.

Let me put it for you again -- suppose I, your Pastor, came to you, and looked each of you straight in the eye, and said, "Are you a born-again Christian?" -- how would you answer? Some of you might be able to answer without any hesitation -- "Yes -- I remember exactly when and where and how it happened! and I've never been the same since -- " And you'd have great joy in your heart, no question about that! In fact it may be that in your case I wouldn't have to ask if you'd been born again -- I'm fully aware of it. And there may be others of you whose commitment is no less genuine, who might be able to say to me when I put the question to you: "Are you a born-again Christian?" -- you might not be able to answer with a fervent "Yes!".....but you could say, "I know the Lord Jesus, and I know that I'm being saved."

Having said all of this, hear again the words of Jesus Christ as He spoke them to Nicodemus: "You must be born again." What's to be said about this born-again thing? It raises its head here and there -- "Are you born again?" How can a person know? How does it happen? What's the evidence? Who does the converting? Maybe the question-of-questions that troubles most of us is that for many of us it lacks the dramatic flourish....

....we think of the classic conversion of the Apostle Paul -- a man named Saul is on his journey with orders to kill Christians....then something happens on the way, there is a complete turn-about in the man's life. And now he wants to placard the

the world for Jesus Christ -- he wants to bring every person that he meets into a knowledge of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. He reaches the point in his own life where he can say, "Now that I live, I don't live, but Jesus Christ lives in me!" He's the man who says, "If any man be in Christ, he becomes a brand new person altogether, a new creation." For the Apostle Paul, for anyone who reads the Scriptures, there is a sharp line of demarcation:

BEFORE CHRIST / AFTER CHRIST

....a classic example of conversion of a man who is born again.

....John Wesley grew up in the Church of England, a devout priest of the Church of England. He was baptized, confirmed in the Christian faith. His commitment brought him here to the United States, he wanted to evangelize the Indians in Georgia. His ministry was a failure to all intents and purposes. He returns to England. And then -- was it on the evening of May 25 in the year 1735, at a quarter to nine in Aldersgate Chapel, while someone was reviewing Luther's Commentary on Romans, that John Wesley recorded: "I felt my heart strangely warmed" . . . and a line of demarcation sets in. Now he becomes a man on fire with the faith, and helps to transform the face of England....

....a classic example of conversion.

....Augustine -- one of the greatest of the early church fathers, at one time a rascal if ever there was one. Name the sin, and he thoroughly enjoyed it. Then one day, youngsters playing a game, perhaps, in a sing-song manner saying, "Take-and-read....take-and-read....take-and-read " And he was drawn to the Scriptures. And as he read, the conversion experience set in -- the line of demarcation...his life now different.

....classic examples of conversion -- what it is to be born again.

But for most of us it hasn't happened that way!

Last Sunday as I stood at the sacred desk, as I am wont to do, I lay bare my soul to you, and I told you that God has always been real to me as long as I can remember. And I am profoundly grateful for that. And now I must tell you, as I lay bare my soul, I have had no great dramatic moment in my life where I can draw a line and say: "This was the terrible sinner that I was /

This now is the saint that I've become! "

(You know different than that!)

But as I look back across the years, there's been a gradual deepening of my faith, there has been an increasing awareness of what it is to claim Jesus Christ as my Lord and my Saviour! Which is simply to suggest to you that it may not be for you the way it was with the Apostle Paul -- thank God that you weren't out killing Christians! Or perhaps it may not have been for you as it was for some of the reprobates who were as far down as one can possibly get, and left a trail of all this wickedness behind them....and then to have the conversion experience -- thank God that you didn't have to take that path! But for some of us, maybe the greater majority of us, it's been a gradual development, an increasing awareness of what it is to be a child of God, to be claimed by His love, and to know Him as our Saviour.

I'm in a position now, if you were to ask me, "When were you saved?" -- I would have to say to you, "I don't know when, but I know I am!" And that's the important thing, to know that one is. A Christian's life should be a life that is changed. Your life and my life should always be changing for the better.

Some of you may remember, when you became members of this congregation, in that exceedingly precious moment when you stand within the shadow of this altar and you commit yourself anew to Jesus Christ, you may remember how I said to you: "I would fervently pray that in and through your relationship with this congregation your commitment to Jesus Christ will deepen, and that in a year from now,

He'll mean much more to you than He does right now." This is all part of the conversion experience, this change. For some it may be dramatic, for some of us -- it's gradual.

Now, who does the converting? Preachers don't convert people. You can't button-hole a man and keep him in your grip there, irritate him as you may, and force him into the Kingdom of God. It's the Holy Spirit that does the converting, it's the Holy Spirit who transforms our life, who regenerates us. But I'm happy to tell you, that as you and I respond to the Holy Spirit the joy should become so great that we're aware of it! That's the essential thing -- there should be no doubt in the mind of any Christian that he's claimed by God's love, that he's meant to respond to God's love, and that God's purpose in his life can and is being fulfilled now. And when that happens, there should be a measure of joy.

Christians should be the happiest people on the face of the earth. Some people, because of their temperament and their personality, just glow! There are some folks for whom this is not temperamentally possible, but that does not mean that their awareness of their Lord and Saviour should be less real.

You may find yourself sometimes in a gathering of Christians where they sing their hearts out, and they raise their hands in praise and alleluia....there are some folks who every time they see you will "Praise the Lord" every second that they talk to you. I would not sell this short in any way, as long as this is a genuine and a valid expression and their commitment is more than an exchange of words.

How does a person know if he's been converted? How does a person know that the change has set in? A very simple thing: says the Apostle Paul: "I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me" -- that's how you can know you're being changed, when Christ rules your life.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"THE BIG FISHERMAN"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son
Jesus Christ, our Blessed Lord.
Amen.

Luke 5: 1-11

It is good Lutheran tradition that every sermon that's preached must be rooted and grounded in Scripture. And that means, really now, that more attention should be given to the context as well as the text itself. And while there is a text for today's sermon, you will better appreciate it if you hear now the reading of the context in which the text is found.

The passage is the 5th chapter of the Gospel according to Luke, although reference to this particular incident appears in other chapters in the New Testament as well . . .

"And it came to pass, that, as the people pressed upon him to hear the word of God, he stood by the lake of Gennesaret, and saw two ships standing by the lake; but the fishermen were gone out of them, and were washing their nets.

And he entered into one of the ships, which was Simon's and prayed him that he would thrust out a little from the land. And he sat down, and taught the people out of the ship.

Now when he had left speaking, he said unto Simon, Launch out into the deep, and let down your nets for a draught. And Simon answering said unto him, Master, we have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing; nevertheless at thy word I will let down the net.

And when they had this done, they inclosed a great multitude of fishes; and their net brake. And they beckoned unto their partners, which were in the other ship, that they should come and help them. And they came, and filled both the ships, so that they began to sink.

When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord. For he was astonished, and all that were with him, at the draught of the fishes which they had taken. And so was also James, and John, the sons of Zebedee, which were partners with Simon. And Jesus said unto Simon, Fear not: from henceforth thou shalt catch men.

And when they had brought their ships to land, they forsook all, and followed him. . . "

As you followed carefully as this passage was being read, it must have occurred to you that here was a preacher who had preached a sermon, and followed through. Which is quite a thing to do. It's one thing to stand up and preach... ..it's something entirely different to identify with your people who having heard the sermon, need to see some evidence of the sermon in their daily lives.

The sermon for today bears the title: "The Big Fisherman" and the title refers not to Peter, but to Jesus Christ himself. A sub-title for the sermon could well be - - "Sermonic Follow-Through." Now see if that makes sense to you as this sermon unfolds.

....The sermon was over. No one, it would seem, could quite remember what the preacher said. Rather comforting for some of us, since that preacher was no less than Jesus Christ himself. Strange, isn't it, hardpressed, most of us would have difficulty in recalling the last sermon that we heard preached. Here and there, depending a great deal upon the circumstances, our mood, our need, our frame of mind, the substance of the sermon, the style of the preacher - - well, here and there because of these things -- our need, our mood, the substance and style - - maybe a sermon does remain rememberable, but only occasionally. Not too many are really set in the recesses of our mind, point by point.

...illustration? Well, we do a bit better at that, we do have a way of remembering the stories that were told. But alas, not always why the story was told, and the point that the story was meant to make....

But all of that as it is, going back to the context of this passage of Scripture, the sermon was over. No one quite remembered what the preacher said. But to the end of time, we'll always be talking about what He did, once the benediction had been pronounced.

What did that Preacher do when the sermon was over? He went fishing. That's exactly what He did. Down to the docks where the fishermen were to be found.

Why? Good question, really. Perhaps we can best answer by reminding ourselves what sermons are for.

Sermons from the Christian perspective communicate the basic truths of our understanding of God -- His power, His passion, His purpose. No sermon is worth preaching if testimony is not given to this trilogy of truths....

...sermons are always meant to be more than an exercise in words,
no matter how well chosen, no matter how perfectly phrased....

...sermons are always meant to be something more than a solo
performance, no matter how gifted and skilled the artist....

...and sermons were never intended to be something that began and
ended within a 15-20 minute period.....

So remember it and remember it well, that once that preacher had finished His sermon, He had a sermonic follow-through, He left the pulpit to go exactly to the place where His people happened to work. And there He identified with them and their needs.

Really now, I would suggest to you that once a sermon is preached, a "What now?" situation ought to set in. Once a sermon is preached, the congregation should ask themselves the question: "What now? -- What can I do about what I just heard? How can this truth of Scripture be related to me? -- where I live and where I labor?" Let me say it again as earnestly as I can: once the sermon has been preached, a "What now?" situation ought to set in, so that the hearer begins to ask himself the question: "How do I apply this truth to my daily life?"

My friend and colleague in the ministry, a Presbyterian preacher in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, Fred Christian, when he went to Columbus, Ohio, found himself in the happy situation of having two morning services, with an hour-and-a-half between the two of them. And once the 8:00 o'clock service was over, he went to the parish hall where people who had been present confronted him with the sermon that he had preached, and together they dealt not only with the Biblical truth but

the application of that truth - - "Tell me now, Preacher, I've heard you - - how does this truth help me tomorrow morning?" . . . in that manner and that spirit, Jesus Christ, having preached His sermon, went to the place where His hearers were working, and endeavored to apply His truth to their situation. Once the preaching is over, the time for action sets in.

Not far away from this pulpit, in nearby Virginia, there was a Lutheran preacher, a Muhlenberg, no less, -- Frederick, wasn't it? -- who when he had preached his sermon in a critical period in the history of this nation, of this land of the colonies, said something about: "There's a time to preach and a time to fight - - " ...and threw open his clerical garb, and there in clear view before the congregation was the uniform of the militia.....and then, having pronounced the benediction, he marched off to face the troops. And that's the way it ought to be with the preaching of any sermon. That's the way it ought to be once you've heard any sermon - - you ought to be geared for action and march off to face what has to be faced, in the battlefield which remains life itself. For there is always the enemy, there is always the hostile force. So Jesus Christ went down to the docks.

...and what did He find as He faced His hearers? - - an unprofitable night of fishing. They had spent their efforts, they had nothing to show. There was no satisfaction when the day's work was done.

I am fully aware of the fact that this sermon is being preached on the day before a national holiday when we recognize the place of work in our life. I am fully aware of the fact that both of us who are privileged to be your Pastors minister to a people who include any number of folk who do not find their day's work satisfying, who complain again and again about their frustrations more than their failures, because in their frustrations they find that their efforts are not as satisfying as they would like them to be.

God pity any man who is in the ministry, as an example, whose joy is not great in what he is about. God pity any man in church work who doesn't look for-

ward to one season after another, who finds it a spiritually satisfying thing. But not all Christians can find themselves engaged in church vocations. The greater percentage of people who are Christians go to the shop, and go to the office, go to the store, go to the laboratory....and there they must spend their day after day after day. And they, too, are meant to be engaged in something that can be found satisfying and rewarding. The people to whom Jesus Christ went after He preached that sermon were distraught because they had spent their energy and had little to show for it. What, now, to be said?

Jesus Christ comes upon the scene, and He says, "Do what I tell you." The first thing that Jesus Christ exacts from any of us is obedience. The title that the disciples had for Him, and rightly so, was 'Master' -- and 'Lord.' - - and that means one to be respected and one to be obeyed.

Did it ever occur to you that in some cases when our work is less than satisfying, it could be because we have yet to discover the way Jesus Christ would go about doing that work? Must I remind you that Jesus Christ was a preacher for only about three years? He was 30 years of age before He began preaching. What was He doing all of those other years? -- working in a carpenter shop...working with His hands. Was He less, then, about God's work than the days He went preaching and teaching and performing miracles? Of course not! So Jesus Christ came to those disciples and found them in their situation and He said, "Why don't you try it my way?"

Is it too much to suggest to you that Jesus Christ is always coming to us where we are and saying, "Try it my way!" Much of our perplexity lies in the fact that we want to do it our own way. For shame upon many of us that God figures into the picture very easily when we're here . . . but how seldom do we think about God figuring into the picture when I sit before the ledger....when I reach for the test tube....when I prepare a lesson....when I sell a piece of merchandise. The measure of a man's commitment can be found, perhaps, undoubtedly when he's in a company of people such as you right now. No question about that! But I would also remind you that a measure of a man's commitment to Jesus Christ is the way he obeys Christ

in the place where he works. And if you and I cannot bring honor and glory to God in our day's work, then there's something wrong either with our commitment or the kind of work that claims our energy. It's good Scriptural admonition: "Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

I am absolutely convinced that many of us find less than joy in our work because God doesn't figure enough into the picture. Any disciple, as far as Jesus Christ is concerned, is meant to express discipleship day in and day out.

Some years back I told you this story and I feel constrained to tell it to you again, for it's a truth that must be emphasized anew. There was a man who found great joy in his commitment to Jesus Christ, his soul was possessed with a measure of peace because he knew Jesus Christ to be his Lord and his Saviour -- he became radiant with it. And once a man knows this kind of thing he can't very easily keep it to himself. What do you suppose he did? He fell upon the happy notion of talking to people about Jesus Christ where he worked. And he took his lunch break to do it. I am equally happy to tell you that he did it in a very good way -- it wasn't at all offensive. And he didn't try to superimpose upon other people his particular pattern of Christian discipleship.

So he talked to people about Jesus Christ and what it meant to have Jesus Christ take over his life, and how he felt as though each day when he got up in the morning he was saying, "I am here reporting for duty today, Christ -- you take me wherever the day is meant to take me, but let me obey you - - " Well, he testified to this sort of thing.

And there was one person in particular to whom he spoke day after day without registering too much. But then one day, thanks to the Holy Spirit, this man responded.....and he knelt on the floor in the shop and gave his life to Christ. That's the way it has to be said because that's exactly what happened. He said he wanted Christ to take over.....and his tutor-in-Christ offered a prayer for him, then and there. And then as he got up from his knees he turned to his friend and said, "What

do I do now?" - - as much as, perhaps, to think that maybe his mentor in Christ would say, "Well, show up tonight at the prayer meeting and give a testimony - - ".....or.... "I'll ask the preacher to put you on the Evangelism Committee - - "or...."We'll sign you up as a Sunday School teacher " A natural follow-through, and important as these things may be. But much to his surprise, the man who had led him to Jesus Christ said, as he asked the question with the glow of discipleship fresh upon him, "What do I do now?"

.....his friend said, "Make certain that the boss gets a good day's work!"

And this, too, becomes our Christian discipleship.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

Remember - 1 Cor. 11:24

In company with many of you, no journey, a return visit to the place from which I came, is ever complete without going by the house where I was brought up as a youngster, without visiting the church where I was baptized and confirmed in the Christian faith, without going to that cemetery at the edge of town where my parents had been laid to rest.

This is no sentimental journey, let me make that as plain as I can, but it's a necessity for me . . .

...I need to remember the stock from which I have stemmed....

...I need to recall the influence at work in my life in my formative years...

...I need with a bowed head to thank God for those who helped to shape and fashion my life and to point me in the right direction....

...I need to recognize that I came into this world with arms waiting to receive me, with people there to help and to care....

The older I become, the more I recognize the precious truth that all of us have been on the receiving end of life - - what have we that we have not received?

A man is, then, according not only to the things that he anticipates but a man is also according to the things that he remembers. Small wonder, then, that our Blessed Lord, when He instituted the Sacrament that we're about to receive today, said very directly to His disciples: "Whenever you do this, remember . . ."

A man needs to remember what's been done for him.

A man needs to remember what's been given to him. Let there be no question about it, the Sacrament itself remains a mystery. Who can explain it? But there are some things about it that we can understand. One is the value to remember that

when we receive the Sacrament it was our Blessed Lord who said, "This I give to you -- receive it. My life I have sacrificed for you -- benefit by it. Remember, you have been purchased with a price -- the cost has been paid."

....a man goes through life in an entirely different
way when he's always reminding himself that someone
has made a sacrifice in his behalf. Amen.

* * *

(Transcribed as recorded)

"THE MEANING OF THIS DAY"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Psalm 24: 6

The brief meditation on this day of praise and thanksgiving bears the title
"On The Meaning Of This Day." And the text is from an ancient psalm, the 24th.

The lines read in this manner:

"This is the generation of them that
seek him."

Do you presume there was a measure of pride in his voice when the first person to speak those words declared them? Could it well be that he looked out upon a world where many people would not think in terms of God, but he was happy to be numbered in the ranks of those who are claimed as the faithful ones. No matter what other people may do, no matter how far other folk may separate them from God and the things that belong to God, this man says "We belong to the generation who think His thoughts, who do His work, who seek after Him, who give Him glory."

I am constrained to remind you as I stand at the sacred desk that that's the way this day needs to be read. Herein lies the meaning of this day: we belong to that generation by what we have done we bear testimony to the fact that we give God glory and seek His way.

The brief article on Page Four of the current issue of Saint Luke MESSENGER properly refers to the good fortune that this congregation has repeatedly experienced in her comparatively young years. A few months shy of our 40th birthday, again and again the people of this parish have turned to God with nothing less than a grateful heart. Today is no exception. Only a limited number among you, a precious few, that is, are present today who shared in each eventful episode in the history of this congregation. As an example . . .

...the signing of the charter -- when it was made known in no uncertain way that there would be a Lutheran witness for Jesus Christ in this particular community....

...or present when they called the first pastor -- "We need a shepherd, we need a bishop of our souls -- who now can we call in God's name to do that for us?" an eventful moment in the life of any people....

...perhaps present when the time was come -- "We will purchase a tract of land, and if no commercial enterprise will loan us the money, we'll finance it ourselves"

...groundbreaking for the church, the laying of the cornerstone, the construction of the Education unit

...decision upon decision determined by a devout and dedicated people. That's the history of this parish -- again and again, some eventful thing for which the people turned to God with nothing less than a grateful heart.

As we share the present moment it is given to us to have some measure of high and holy regard for it, right now. Yet there are those who maintain that it is only afterward, long months or years away from the happening, that we truly gain an appreciation for the event or the incident itself. But nonetheless it is meet, right and proper that we endeavor to assess -- now -- in this time, in this place, the meaning of what we are experiencing today.

There is the inclination to think of it, as has already been indicated, as a big moment. But I am constrained to remind you of General Briggs, the character in Lillian Holman's play "Autumn Garden" -- it is he who makes this wise observation that we may be inclined to forget at great peril. Said he: "At any given moment, you are only the sum of your life to that point. There are no big moments that we can reach unless we have a pile of smaller moments to stand on."

Permit me also to bring to your attention the two lovers, the young man and

the young woman in Rogers and Hammerstein's "Carrousel" - - they are day-dreamingand they are thinking about how wonderful their life together one day will be. In the lyrics that they sing comes the line: "When today is a long time ago." You are right, good one, the sentiment so expressed prompts us to think deeply - - we ought constantly to remind ourselves that while we cannot know what the outward circumstances of life will be in some distant day, yet as far as character, commitment and philosophy are concerned, the future is a continuation of the present. You cannot read this present moment apart from an understanding of the past . . . nor can you see it in its proper perspective without thinking in terms of the years yet to come. In that light, then, how shall we answer the question: "What is the meaning of this day?"

The text, as I have already indicated to you, gives an answer: "We are a generation that seek God - - who think in His terms, no matter how falteringly, and whose noble intention is to give God glory, to raise the banner of Jesus Christ aloft, in a world that's prone to ignore Him."

Just as none among us, either within or without our community, can pass by this place without taking note of what has been raised here -- this three-level addition, this enlarged facility - - just as this Nave and the Christian Education unit are tangible evidence, constructed as a sign, as a landmark -- who we are -- what goes on here.... no one, it would seem to me, can pass by who has any appreciation at all for the Christian witness, or with any limited amount of appreciation, without associating this structure with us, what we're about...and with God. And even so, generations to come will look upon this people in this place as those who give God glory.

Should it be said that the 70's was a time of decadence and prodigal living, let the historian, the keeper of the story, record that here was found a company of people who kept alive the God-factor, who link their existence to the Creator, who exalt the name of the Redeemer. Should it be said in years to come that ours

was an age drifting toward Hell, with increased rapidity -- that here was a people who stemmed the tide and defiantly and courageously raised the name of Jesus Christ....

...that's the meaning of this day. That's why we've done what we've done. That's why we will use it as we will use it.

The meaning of this day also lies in another perspective. A dream, an ideal to a degree -- only to a degree -- has been realized. I'd be less than honest if I did not remind you that for some of us the dream was not fulfilled. The building has been constructed....but not the total subscribed. Some of us had hoped and dreamed that the total sum would be subscribed before we dedicated the structure. Some of us had hoped and dreamed that perhaps all bills would have been paid by the time we dedicated the structure.....some of us had hoped that every single person of the parish would find it possible to have some part in it. That dream, realistically, has not been fulfilled.

Herein also lies the meaning of this day. Dream we may, and no matter how nobly intentioned we may order the course of our days, there may come a time when God's Word must still be advanced -- even though we fall short of the dream that we have had. The dream was necessary. We could never have reached the point that we've reached today had we not thought in terms of such dreams. But we are not to be frustrated. To the contrary, we are inspired and renew our courage all over again. This, too, is the meaning of this day, and gloriously so.

And one writes the footnote to what has just been said -- the Gospel must always be preached, and here's the note of the Gospel that's made relevant for us now -- we who desire to serve our Lord Jesus Christ without sin -- again and ever so often we fall short . . . but the dream remains, and God says: "You start again -- and you keep the dream before you!" This I most certainly believe.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"THE COMMON MERCIES OF GOD"

O GOD, We make so little of the opportunity that you give us again and again to think about Your Word. But now we find ourselves in this place with time being allotted us to give some measure of undivided attention to the Good Book. By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, enable us to make the most of this, Through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who when He came, came preaching. Amen.

Psalm 51:15

By your leave, let me take liberty with God in your presence. Listen now as I would say this to Him:

"God, You think of everything, but I'm inclined to suggest that perhaps You've overlooked something. When you encourage people to come to You, when You encourage people to pray to You, to approach Your Throne of Grace, would You be willing to accept this suggestion of a humble servant of Yours - -

Why don't You make it a requirement that when they approach You they carry in their hand a tape recorder - - or if that's not possible, You advise them that what they're about to say is being recorded, and in due course of time will be played back to them....

Or if that doesn't seem reasonable to you, God, why don't You have them approach You in a hall of mirrors, so that when they are about to talk to You they will be fully aware of this series of reflections by which they'll have to read the lines on their faces, on which they will have to see the expressions of their concern as they talk with You "

And then God, who knows everything, will say, "I know exactly why you're proposing this, because you've dealt long enough with people to be made aware of the fact that when they approach the Throne of Grace, they may come in three different categories -----

-- there are those who when they come to God, they come as complainers - - - "O God, I've been dealt a bad blow

by life -- life hasn't treated me justly at all!"

And any number of people that I know who when they come to God spend the greater portion of their time complaining. It might be a very salutary thing if we could be taken to task, then, and hear played back for us the lament of our voices as we express the complaint of our souls -- to a good God, whose mercies are without end. And that's the title for this sermon on this day that marks the Festival of the Harvest: "The Common Mercies of God."

...or, on the other hand, if we would be forced to see ourselves, with those lines drawn upon our faces as we complain to this bountiful God.

-- or if we don't come to God as complainers, we come to God as beggars. Again and ever so often we mark the path that leads to God simply because we want something from His hand. We don't come for any other reason....

Then there's a third category -- neither a complainer nor a beggar, but a very happy soul, who's personified by the words of the text that you're about to hear -- the 15th verse of Psalm #51:

"O Lord, open thou my lips, and my mouth
shall show forth thy praise."

" . . . God, I want you to know that I'm the kind of a person who, when I come to you I can't wait to let the whole world know how absolutely wonderful you are! You are a good God. You are a great Godas one who said 'good in your greatness and great in your goodness' . . . Dear God, lest I be numbered among those who go through life insensitive to Your mercies, you make it Your business to prod me -- You make it Your business to prick my conscience -- make me, O God, a sensitive soul! -- that I may be made aware of Your mercies that abound and are everywhere present."

Now, in which category do you fall, my friend? -- complainer....beggar.... or one who would praise God for His mercies? -- even so much so that he would ask God to prick his conscience and prod him that this might be done --

"O Lord, open thou my lips . . . " -- to what end?

"that I may show forth your praise."

I know that when you read the newspapers you're inclined to say to yourself, it's a wicked world. I know that when you have your moments when you brood, you're inclined to say that the world -- as I told you on occasion as I take myself to task in your presence -- that we seem to be the kind of a world that's drifting rapidly toward Hell and only inching toward the direction of Heaven. I told you that some time ago.

And God bless her, a member of the congregation met me in the corridor between the rear of the Nave and the room where we greet people, and she looked at me as much as to take me to task and say, "Pastor, but it's still a good world - - it's not as wicked as you gave us to believe this morning!" Well, it could well be that she found some joy in the past week which enabled her to say that and to think it, and God be praised for it! And I'm ashamed if I leave you with that impression. But that's the bottom line that has to be written, that the world is going to Hell - - sure I brood! And if you haven't labeled me yet as properly as you ought, label me as one who broods, but label me as a brooding optimist! For the mercies of God are still to be seen....His hand outstretched to us is never, never empty. The bottom line remains: He's a good God, and His mercies are unfailing.

That's one of the grand and good things that we're doing today when we celebrate the Festival of Harvest. Sure, we're an urbanized society....sure, there are less than 5% of you this morning who may have some garden that you've tilled, and cultivated, and weeded, and cared for -- so that you may by your own hand pluck the fruits of the good earth and recognize firsthand the meaning of the harvest. We need to do this kind of thing -- to put these reminders about us,

that it is by the hand of the Lord that we are sustained.

It was John Arnold, bless his soul, who wrote one time: "The world has seen the passing of many civilizations, but the harvest which God ordains before any of them has outlasted them all. The world has seen many wicked men, but the sun and the rain have not ceased to fertilize their fields. So the love of God endures through all time and through all evil. Nothing can stop Him from expressing it." The seed-time and the harvest constantly remind us that it is by the Lord's hand that we are provided. It's as though God waits until this time of the year to provide us the flaming foliage...it's as though God waits until this time of the year that God sets before us the harvest wagons with their creaking wheels, heavily laden -- to say, here is Exhibit A -- look, if you haven't seen before, that my hand has been at work, and is at work, in your behalf.

God's mercies are everywhere present. But only the sensitive ones are made aware of it. That's why, I suppose, I can tell you that nobody in Paris, perhaps, would simply stop and look as Jean Batiste Pierre LeMarc did day after day as he lay on the floor of his windowless garret -- no overcoat -- through the sky-light studied the clouds. Get the picture again -- in all of his loneliness -- it was LeMarc and LeMarc alone lying on his back in that windowless garret -- looking at the sky through the sky-light, and studying the formation of the clouds. You may still read his description of what he saw...the rare formations that anyone might have seen -- but no one did! He had formed for the science of generations to come his deathless bit of an appreciation for the common mercies of God as so revealed in the heavens.

And I suppose it was because that man had always glanced at the birds and beasts of the forest without ever stopping long enough to see them, but the young lad, broken in fortune, set out with his wife into the Kentucky wilderness, singing to her, playing on his violin -- watching it....and leaving to

the future its art creatures -- painting as in the life on the pages of his album -- designed each page of his album with a name that we dare not forget -- John James Audubon. Many have seen what he had seen . . . he is the one who's opened our eyes to the mercies of God in this world of the feathered creation. As I come to this sacred desk I would remind you that we live in a world where the mercies of God are still in evidence. But they must be seen, they must be appreciated.

The tragedy of tragedies, I think, comes sometimes in our human relationships -- the blessings that God makes possible for us through those who love us. Isn't it the poet who one time took a man to task and said, "Hush, I pray you, what if this friend happened to be God?" Some of us, to the day that we breathe our last, will praise the name of God for those whom He raised up to love us, to care for us. No man is hopeless who has a friend.....no man is useless who is one. The mercies of God revealed to us daily by those who love us, who care for us, who pray for us.

Think of what it must have been when Jesus was here on earth, when there were those whose eyes were closed to the mercies of God which He had made incarnate in Jesus Christ. The poet has put it this way:

"Josès, the brother of Jesus
Was only a worker in wood;
And he could never see the glory
That Jesus his brother could.
'Why stays he not in the work-shop?'
He often used to complain --
Sawing the Lebanon cedars, imparting to
 woods their stain - -
'Why must he go thus roaming,
Forsaking my father's trade?
While hammers are busily sounding,
And there is gain to be made?'
Thus ran the mind of Josès,
Apt with plummet and rule,
And deeming whoever surpassed him
Either a knave or a fool.
For he never walked with the prophets
Of God's great garden of bliss - -

And of all the mistakes of the ages,
The saddest, methinks, was this:
To have such a brother as Jesus,
To speak with Him day by day,
And never to catch the vision
Which glorified His clay."

.....and what if that should happen to us -- to be exposed to the abundant
and perfect and complete mercy of God in Jesus Christ our Redeemer.....and never
to be able to put our fingers to our lips and reverently whisper the name of
God!

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

October 28, 1978

THE ON-GOING REFORMATION

CRISP, Dewey and Bruce When God was
with us and gave His Son Jesus Christ,
and His Spirit to us.

There is a file folder that I have, you ought to know it, that's entitled
"Reformation." And occasionally I go back and I look at some of the material
I've accumulated over the years. I just finished briefly the other day when I
looked and I discovered that I had looked in that folder about 16 - 17 years ago,
at a moment that had come my way from some promotional outfit, hoping that
perhaps a number of Lutheran churches would introduce a new feature in their
worship on Reformation Sunday.

Sunday. The suggestion was being made in that announce-
ment that the people might grab pencils on the inside of the church on Reforma-
tion Sunday, at the same entrance, and whether participating, as they gathered they
would have an introductory feature.

Now that introductory feature would have a number of the congregation
dressed like Martin Luther, and with a hammer in his hand (or a pot of paste or
glue, whatever it might be) -- he'd carry this parchment-like material repre-
senting Luther's Ninety-Five Theses, and then on the Red Doors out here he'd
post those theses. And so we would be reminded of what Martin Luther had done
on October 31, at high noon, in the year 1517.

We've never done that in Saint Luke, as you well know. I have little
enthusiasm for doing it. There are two reasons. One, I'm not so sure that
what is historically correct, what it happened just like that -- we've glamo-
rized it a bit. And secondly, and far more important, is the fact that Martin
Luther did not begin the Reformation. And that leads me to announce to you now
the title for this 1517 sermon on this day: "THE ON-GOING REFORMATION."

Many, many, and one day will be... God willing, he will not be the last. The Church has always had its reformers. For God in His wisdom has allowed the Church to exist, but the Church is made up of human beings who are not perfect people. And there is always the possibility of our committing error, and even the Church of Jesus Christ can have for times when it might be corrupt. Again and over so often God in His wisdom has seen fit to raise up this person and that person to become the reformer, to pronounce the necessity for renewal, that we might be restored to what the Church is meant to be.

This is always going on. Even when you read the pages of the Old Testament, take what you find as an example, prophet that he was. He was calling for renewal of Israel; that they should have done with some of the things that were false....

...Told the Baptist, ever before Jesus Christ, you're perfectly right in thinking of him as a reformer, as with great zeal he came as a voice in the wilderness, told people to repent and to change their ways, and to deal with only those things that are essential, and to give good and proper value to them....

....you probably never thought of this, but even Jesus Christ, with that brief ministry of His here on earth, can be looked upon as a reformer who called people to get back to the things that really matter most, to the things that are basic to the Christian experience....

....The Apostle Paul and the missionaries who followed in his train -- again and over so often spent their time and their energy in reformation -- re-formation, re-structuring, re-newing the Christian Church.

On this day, however, we recognize the contribution that Martin Luther made. He made it in two ways. First, to call attention to the Church the necessity to recognize that work is basic in one's relationship to Jesus Christ. You must always begin at that point and end at that point. Three people became men-

best of this congregation this morning... 30-odd will become members at 11:00 o'clock. When they met in their first session -- you should be pleased to know this -- the announcement was made at the very beginning -- "We're interested to meet with you, we're interested to talk with you, not just because we want to add another name to the roster of this congregation, not because we may be interested in seeing Baptists and Methodists and Presbyterians become Lutheran -- God forbid that that should be the reason we exist!" But I said to them, as well I should have said -- "We're here to talk to you about your commitment to Jesus Christ, and when you become a member of this congregation you become a member of this congregation because you're committing yourself to Jesus Christ as Lord and Master." This must always be basic. Martin Luther struck that note. The Church in his day was forgetting it. They were going on one side-track after another.

In my judgment, I get a thrill the like of which I seldom know anywhere else when I visit St. Peter's in Rome -- one of the most magnificent churches in all Christendom. It has a place all of its own. But I remember that it was a man named John Tetzel who in Luther's day came gathering funds to build St. Peter in Rome. He was a seller of indulgences, so eager was he to get that church built. They even had a kind of a jingle that they used when they asked people to come and toss coins in the collection plate --

"As soon as the coins in the coffer ring,
Then the souls out of purgatory's fire spring."

I say to you, it was necessary that St. Peter's be built. It's been a tremendous witness to the Christian faith and remains a great witness -- just as I hope this place at the corner of Colesville Road and Highland Drive remains as a witness to the Christian faith, whatever other purpose it serves for us in a very practical way. But St. Peter's was never intended to be built as the corruption of the teaching of the Church. That's what infuriated that faithful priest of the Church, Martin Luther. He said a man is not going to be saved by

what he does....a man is not going to be saved by what he does. A man is saved solely by faith, faith in Jesus Christ.

It is necessary that we do good works -- I would not want to spend another day in your company if you people were not bent on doing good. It is absolutely essential that we give to support the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. We couldn't possibly have a refugee family come all the way from Southeast Asia if you people were not willing to make contributions. We could not have this significant ministry of music, we could not have this significant ministry to youth, Christian Education, ministry to people with special needs with the necessary financial support. Make no mistake about that. But just because a man supports these causes does not guarantee him a passport to Heaven.

One of the fastest-growing churches in the United States is that Presbyterian Church in Coral Ridge, or is it Coral Gables, Florida, where under the leadership of a dynamic pastor they have an evangelism explosion. They hardly know what to do with all the people who are coming their way, in the name of Jesus Christ.

They have people go out two-by-two -- they knock on the door, they are allowed to come in....they cross the threshold, they sit down, they engage the people in conversation. But they have a target -- they have something in mind before they terminate their conversation. Always there are two questions that have to be introduced: If you were to die tonight, do you have the assurance that you would go to Heaven?

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And if, standing at the Gate of Heaven, Jesus Christ, or St. Peter, should address you with the question: Why should you be allowed to enter Heaven? -- how would you answer?

A man makes a mistake if he thinks at that time he can parade in front of Jesus Christ a record of good deeds. Even Jesus Christ said, "I was hungry, and

you did not give me anything to eat....I was naked, and you did not give me anything to wear.....I was thirsty and you did not give me anything to drink....I was sick and you did not come to visit me....I was in prison and you did not minister to me - - " Jesus Christ surely strikes the note of the need for doing good. But the basic Christian teaching is this: Man does not do good in order to be saved . . . but because he is being saved he does good things! And that's the basic principle of the Protestant Reformation, that's what Martin Luther was saying - - you get this thing straight, now. It's because of your love for Jesus Christ that you become the kind of person who does good. Again and again the Church needs to remind itself of this basic principle.

And again and again the Church needs to remind itself that only as we search the Scriptures and root and ground ourselves in the Scriptures do we have that stability and that integrity that allows the Church to stand so that even the Gates of Hell cannot prevail against it. Reformation is an on-going thing. Again and again and ever so often we need to sit back and ask ourselves the question: Are we still being true to what the Church is meant to be?

Every now and then you permit me to be very personal. Twenty-four years ago, I dare say, tomorrow morning, tomorrow afternoon, I first crossed the threshold of Saint Luke Church and had that session that evening with the members of your Church Council and the Pulpit Committee. And then that last Sunday morning in January, 1956, when I first preached to you, I came asking the question:

"What will you do with Jesus Christ?"

....and I should be very happy indeed if you could look back across these two decades-plus of my preaching, and this has been the basic theme: What will you do with Jesus Christ! His must always be their primary loyalty. And again and ever so often we need to remind ourselves that that's exactly what it's all about! And we've got to keep that principle renewed in our lives -- restored.

When Winifred and I began our years together we lived in that lovely person-

age in South Williamsport, Pennsylvania -- it had Victorian features, a lovely gracious porch on two sides of the building. And as you could visualize it, it had a banister, or a railing. Two blocks away was the Williamsport Milk Products Company, with their huge chimney that vomited soot into the heavens . . . it was almost an annual ritual either to take that brush and to scrub that white-painted banister to restore it to what it had been, or to paint it. We had to keep after it -- just like those marble steps in Baltimore -- you go there on a Saturday morning and you'll see the housewives out there scrubbing those marble steps to keep them gleaming white. You have to keep after it.

Reformation is an on-going thing -- human as we are, there is always the possibility that we might corrupt the basic teachings of Jesus Christ, to our own damnation. Eternal vigilance is the price that has to be paid within the Christian experience. And that's what the Reformation is all about.

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"THE ON-GOING REFORMATION"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

There is a file folder that I keep, you ought to know it, that's entitled "Reformation." And occasionally I go back and I look at some of the material I've accumulated across the years. I smiled rather broadly the other day when I looked and I discovered what I had tucked in that folder about 16 - 17 years ago, an announcement that had come my way from some promotional outfit, hoping that perhaps a number of Lutheran churches would introduce a new feature in their service on Reformation Sunday. The suggestion was being made in that announcement that the pastors might greet people on the outside of the church on Reformation Sunday, at the main entrance, and weather permitting, as they gathered they would have an introductory feature.

Now that introductory feature would have a member of the congregation dressed like Martin Luther, and with a hammer in his hand (or a pot of paste or glue, whatever it might be) - - he'd carry this parchment-like material representing Luther's Ninety-five Theses, and then on the Red Doors out here he'd post those theses. And so we would be reminded of what Martin Luther had done on October 31, at high noon, in the year 1517.

We've never done that in Saint Luke, as you well know. I have little enthusiasm for doing it. There are two reasons. One, I'm not so sure that that is historically correct, that it happened just like that - - we've glamorized it a bit. And secondly, and far more important, is the fact that Martin Luther did not begin the Reformation. And that leads me to announce to you now the title for this brief sermon on this day: "THE ON-GOING REFORMATION."

Martin Luther was not the first reformer.....God willing, he will not be the last. For the Church has always had its reformers. For God in His wisdom has allowed the Church to exist, but the church is made up of human beings who are not perfect people. And there is always the possibility of our committing error, and even the Church of Jesus Christ can have its time when it might be corrupt. Again and ever so often God in His wisdom has seen fit to raise up this person and that person to become the reformers, to pronounce the necessity for renewal, that we might be restored to what the Church is meant to be.

This is always going on. Even when you read the pages of the Old Testament, take that man Amos as an example, prophet that he was. He was calling for renewal of Israel, that they should have done with some of the things that were false.....

.....John the Baptist, even before Jesus Christ, you're perfectly right in thinking of him as a reformer, as with great zeal he came as a voice in the wilderness, told people to repent and to change their ways, and to deal with only those things that are essential, and to give good and proper value to them.....

.....you probably never thought of this, but even Jesus Christ, with that brief ministry of His here on earth, can be looked upon as a reformer who called people to get back to the things that really matter most, to the things that are basic to the Christian experience.....

.....the Apostle Paul and the missionaries who followed in his train -- again and ever so often spent their time and their energy in reformation -- re-formation, re-structuring, re-newing the Christian Church.

On this day, however, we recognize the contribution that Martin Luther made. He made it in two ways. First, to call attention to the Church the necessity to recognize that what is basic is one's relationship to Jesus Christ. You must always begin at that point and end at that point. Three people became mem-

bers of this congregation this morning....30-some will become members at 11:00 o'clock. When they met in their first session -- you should be pleased to know this -- the announcement was made at the very beginning - - - "We're interested to meet with you, we're interested to talk with you, not just because we want to add another name to the roster of this congregation, not because we may be interested in seeing Baptists and Methodists and Presbyterians become Lutheran -- God forbid that that should be the reason we exist!" But I said to them, as well I should have said - - "We're here to talk to you about your commitment to Jesus Christ, and when you become a member of this congregation you become a member of this congregation because you're committing yourself to Jesus Christ as Lord and Master." This must always be basic. Martin Luther struck that note. The Church in his day was forgetting it. They were going on one side-track after another.

In my judgment, I get a thrill the like of which I seldom know anywhere else when I visit St. Peter's in Rome - - one of the most magnificent churches in all Christendom. It has a place all of its own. But I remember that it was a man named John Tetzel who in Luther's day came gathering funds to build St. Peter's in Rome. He was a seller of indulgences, so eager was he to get that church built. They even had a kind of a jingle that they used when they asked people to come and toss coins in the collection plate - -

"As soon as the coins in the coffer ring,
Then the souls out of pergatory's fire spring."

I say to you, it was necessary that St. Peter's be built. It's been a tremendous witness to the Christian faith and remains a great witness - - - just as I hope this place at the corner of Colesville Road and Highland Drive remains as a witness to the Christian faith, whatever other purpose it serves for us in a very practical way. But St. Peter's was never intended to be built at the corruption of the teaching of the Church. That's what infuriated that faithful priest of the Church, Martin Luther. He said a man is not going to be saved by

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(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"THE OTHER SIDE"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Revelation 7:9

On this day in the Calendar of the Church when we think of those who have been translated into God's nearer presence, the sermon bears the title "The Other Side." And the text -- it's the 9th verse of the 7th chapter of the Book of the Revelation:

"After this I beheld, and lo, a great multitude which no man could number, of all nations, kindreds, people, tongues, they stood before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands."

Now.....concerning Heaven. But first, a word about death. Maybe we don't think as much as we should about Heaven or Hell because we don't much want to think about death. And if we should think about death, usually it's in the light of other people dying, not ourselves.

Did I not read once of a man who being very sensitive, did a very good and proper thing - - he took a favorite niece of his to visit the family burial plot, and as they walked from one grave to another he pointed out where her grandparents had been buried.....and then he took her by the hand and pointed out for her the place where her own father and mother had been laid to rest. And then he shocked her a great deal, honestly he did, when pressing her hand very gently, he pointed to an undesignated site and simply said, "And this is where you will be buried." He had never thought of it in those terms, that one day she too would be as they now were.

We have a way of thinking about death perhaps, but usually in the terms of someone else's. And I smile somewhat when I think of the old couple, facing the autumn years of life, sitting on that porch swing on the summer night...and

then they were reminiscing, thinking of all the folks they had come to know, and then rather sadly, lamenting the fact that their circle of friends and acquaintances was getting smaller and smaller. And she said to him, " . . and one day there will only be one of us left." And he retorted quickly by saying, "And when that time comes, I'm moving to Arizona!" - - sure, it was going to come, but to someone else! So often when we think of death it's someone else's dying.

What can I say to you this morning as I come to this sacred desk as one committed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ? I'm constrained to talk to you about Heaven. What do I know about Heaven? All that I know about Heaven is what I have been taught. And very quickly I would also tell you -- please indulge me personally for the moment - - if you were to ask me right now, even at my age, when perhaps you might be inclined to expect a more sophisticated answer - - if you were to ask me right now: "Where is your father?" . . . "Where is your mother?" . . . "Where is one of your younger brothers?"even at my age, unashamedly I would answer, "I have every reason to believe they are in Heaven -- they were baptized, they were confirmed in the Christian faith!" And I say it with the utmost measure of respect, despite all their failures, despite all their limping along through life, human as they were, they believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. And when they had their moments to think of journey's end, God was especially gracious to my younger brother -- he got a six-months' warning! Each of them in turn had reason to believe when they came to journey's end there would be the outstretched arms of Jesus Christ. Christians have a right to believe this, and Christians are in duty bound to live out the days of their years enlightened and motivated to good living by such a happy prospect.

Curious as we are, what is Heaven like? None of us has ever been there. But we have our moments when we think of those who are there, and then we become interested. Did I ever tell you about the man who for years lived on the south side of the river? - - that was ancestral territory for him, his family had always

lived there. He was up in years now, and he became surprised when his daughter came who was a school teacher, and she said she was answering a call to a new position and she'd have to move from the south side of the river -- up the river to the other side. And then by his own admission he began to think in terms of the "other side of the river" -- and what was it like?....because now he had a more genuine and more personal interest, for someone that he loved very much was there. He even reached the place where he was anticipating making his visit to the "other side." And all that he knew about the other side was what she would write and tell him. And she could speak authoritatively, because she was there.

All that I know about the other side, all that I know about Heaven, quite frankly, I can tell you on the basis of what the one who can speak authoritatively tells us -- even Jesus Christ. Knowing of our natural curiosity, knowing of our natural interest, as He was completing His earthly pilgrimage He called His friends together -- people such as you, and answering a need in their lives He spoke to them about Heaven, in words that you and I treasure....recorded for us as the 14th chapter of the Gospel according to John: "Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid. Ye believe in God; believe also in me." And then he said, "On the basis of your trust in Me, on the basis of your willingness to believe what I can tell you -- hear these words -- "In my Father's House there is going to be a place for you. I'll go ahead and I'll make it ready and I'll be there to greet you."

He spoke authoritatively. I believe Him. There comes a time in the life of every one of us when we have to respond in trust to those we believe. We may not be familiar with what's going on we may not be familiar with the subject. But there comes a time when we have to trust someone who speaks authoritatively and who gives us the necessary assurance.....else we can be of all people very miserable.

I've told some of you this on occasion, perhaps you'll allow me to speak of it again. As I recall it, it continues to hold me in good stead. Not long after

World War II I made my first trip across the waters, spending two-and-a-half months in war-torn Europe. I got along fairly well in England -- I could speak English, of course.....didn't do too badly, in a faltering way, with French when I was in France, and when I was in Switzerland. But when I boarded the Orient Express at the Bonhoff(?) in Zurich, I was a little bit troubled, for I was going to be heading for Prague and Czechoslovakia, in Warsaw in Poland -- I didn't know a single person there and I couldn't speak a single sentence in their language....nary a word. But then I was comforted as the train was pulling out a friend of mine came and said, "Relax -- I can tell you this: a friend that we have in common will meet you at the Wilson Station in Prague"(the Wilson Station as it was then known) -- "He's made a reservation in your name. He'll be there to greet you, to see that all of your needs are met. And he'll also make a similar arrangement for you in Poland."

I suggest to you that life is like a journey. And none of us knows the things with which we'll have to deal and as anxious as we may be before we get to journey's end. But for the Christian, who believes in Jesus Christ, we have the assurance that when we arrive all things will be made ready. There will be a place for us -- only for him who puts his trust in Jesus Christ there is that measure of blessed assurance.

And what's it like? All we know is what we have been told by those who can speak authoritatively. And God in His mercy, and God in His love, once revealed it as He revealed it perhaps to no one else, to an old man who spent his time and his energy thinking the things of God....an old man on the Isle of Patmos, John was his name -- as spiritually sensitive a person as God has given us. And he recorded for us in that wonderful book of the Revelation his glimpse of Heaven, capsule-fashion in the text for today, and that text tells us three things about Heaven as John saw it:

One - surprised by joy, a good many people were there! So often when you and I think of Heaven, we think the greater portion of people will be somewhere else.....and, for shame upon me when I have told you that the world seems to be heading rapidly toward Hell and inching only toward Heaven, and slowly so. But John says, "Many people are in Heaven."and that's a happy thought.

A happy thought in this regard: be careful how you deal with people as you meet them along the highway of life that may not be exactly to your liking - - you never know what's going on down deep inside, but look upon each one as a candidate for Heaven.....look upon each one as trying to find his way toward Heaven's gate. How differently we might treat each other if we looked upon one another in a gracious assist toward this sublime destination. Says John -- "Many people there" . . . that's a happy thought.

Secondly - John, in his glimpse of Heaven, says "People are from everywhere -- of all nations, of all kindreds, of all tongues."

For shame upon some of us -- we have a way of Americanizing Heaven as though we had a corner on it. And what's worse yet, every now and then I meet a kind of Lutheran, a despicable brand or breed of Lutheran, who thinks that Heaven is Lutheranized - - for that's fallacious. God has the whole world in His hand. Says the Scandinavian theologian, "We're all in the hand of God, whether with our belief or our unbelief." And all of us can be headed toward Heaven...and that's a happy thought.

And then the third thing that he got as he had this glimpse of Heaven -- a time of rejoicing, a time of triumphing -- the strife is o'er, the victory's been won.

I don't say this facetiously, you know that I don't - - my parents brought up six kids -- no easy task! at any time. They wore themselves out bringing us

up. As a member of this congregation has a way of saying it, "Parents grow old while their kids grow up." Then God in His kindness and God in His mercy, despite all the problems that they had to face, gives them rest at the end, and peace at the end. The strife is o'er and the victory's been won! They persevered in faith . . . so I think of them.

Says the great man of the Isle of Patmos: "They are singing now, and they're rejoicing and they have the victor's palms that they wave back and forth. You know very well that when you come to church I encourage you to sing happily and heartily, because Christians are meant to be happy people, and they sing the songs of the redeemed.

Who are we? - - Get it in proper perspective -- we're a people who as the old Gospel hymn said, are "Marching to Zion" - - -- Heaven is our destination

.....and that's something to sing about.

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"LIKE A LETTER FROM GOD"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

I am II Timothy

Tell me now, what part of the Bible do you enjoy reading most? The answer, of course, you'd like according to your particular need, or your own individual temperament or personality. By your leave I'd like to tell you what I'm thoroughly enjoying re-discovering these days -- the letters that are found in the Bible.

There are letters there, you know, and among them the letters that Paul, that great advocate for Jesus Christ, who went here and there and established congregations, and always wanted to keep in touch with them. That's one reason why we write letters, isn't it? -- just to keep in touch.

Within the last month, perhaps six weeks. I have concentrated upon one of the letters that he wrote, to a young friend called Timothy. I'm absolutely amazed at the truth that's revealed when age speaks to youth, and the kind of thing that Paul talks about, and especially when he lays down the measure of a man -- the kind of a disciple Jesus wants from all of us. It's good reading -- check it out for yourself. And if you do well on the first one, go on to the Second Letter that he wrote to Timothy.

Speaking of letters, they've always fascinated me. When I have time, I like to write them, and surely I've always enjoyed receiving them...and particularly when they're a personal letter, and when I know the person from whom they come and I have a high regard for the writer.

I have kept a file of letters across the years. Do you mind if I tell you that one of them I prize greatly was written by one of the most gracious women ever to occupy the White House -- Lou Henry Hoover once wrote me a letter. I

always prize a letter that her husband wrote me after he had been President, when he was living in the Waldorf Towers in the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel section in New York City. One of the most precious letters I ever received was a letter that only had two sentences -- told what it had to tell....that was it.

Some letters are long, some are brief. In the mail yesterday I got a letter saying, surprisingly so, -- "This may be the longest letter you've ever received, and we encourage you to read every sentence." It was a long letter, and the introduction didn't turn me off....but rather, to the contrary, it motivated me to read to the very end.

No letter, I think, I've ever received, aside from those that Winifred has written me across the years -- you must be very patient with me -- the letters that I received from my mother. And the one that I cherish more than any other is a letter written in her own hand, addressed in her own hand. She didn't have much beyond a fourth-grade education. When I became your Pastor 24 years ago, the very fact that I'd be living near the Nation's Capital shook her up. She thought I'd be surrounded by highly intelligent people and highly sophisticated people. Bless her soul -- be patient now! -- she was embarrassed to have a letter come to 9100 Colesville Road written in her poor workmanship. And do you know what that godly woman did? . . . she went to the town printer and purchased 500 envelopes with my name and address printed on them so that her son Raymond would not be embarrassed by her penmanship!

Small wonder that we prize certain letters that we receive from certain people, because like as not the letter that we get indicates the integrity and the strength of character of the person who does the writing.

Speaking of letters, in recent weeks I have been concentrating upon this -- a noble idea, I dare say -- if God were to write you a letter! Or better still, if God were to write a letter to every single member of this congregation!

-- that's a bold idea, isn't it?

....and suppose He did. What would it be like? I'd like to answer you as best I can.

I think it would be a very personal letter. Letters that mean most to us are always personal letters, written to us by someone who knows us, and that's surely true of God. He'd know us by name, He'd go on to say, "I know how you got your name -- it was given to you in your baptism . . . and I know what that name means. The world looks upon it as your Christian name, and that's no small thing!" -- God would say to us.

"I know how at one time in your life," as God continues to tell us in this letter that He could write to us, "How having reached the age of reason you stood up publicly and in the presence of people and you professed My Son as Lord and Saviour. You never did anything more wonderful in your life."

God, writing a letter, would tell us that, wouldn't He? -- "You have never done anything more wonderful than when you stood up publicly and professed My Son as Lord and Saviour."

And I think in that letter that God would write us He'd ask us,

"Now what have you been doing with it since you did that? I know. Do you know how well you're measuring up? I assess My people by the measure of their devotion."

And that leads me to tell you the second thing that I think I can tell you about a letter that God would write you: It would be a love letter!

....say it honestly! -- the most precious letters that we've ever received have been love letters. Some day I can picture when Winifred and I face the sunset slope of life, the two of us just sitting down and going over these letters that we had written to each other -- when our love was young.

And what happens in a love letter? -- you're always telling the person who's meant to receive the letter how much you love that person -- let there be no question about it -- and our lives are fashioned, and our lives are shaped by the people who love us. And we need to be told that we're being loved repeatedly.

If God were to write us a letter He'd write us and tell us how much He loves us, what He's done for us, how He's proven His love.

....and then I think in that same letter He'd say, "How about your love for Me -- I know you love Me. But how often do you show your love for Me?" I think He would. I really do!

And the third thing I think I can tell you about that letter that God would write, if God were given to writing us a letter, it would be a plain-spoken letter. He'd get to the point without any reluctance. I get some letters, when I read them I try to say to myself, I wonder what the person's driving at, I wonder what this person is trying to say. Sometimes I've read a letter from the beginning to the end and I've never quite figured it out -- it's in such vague languageor perhaps even the language gets in its way. . . .

...not so with a letter that God would write! For God is given to plain-speaking.

I think I can tell you quite incidentally, I smile broadly when I think of a letter that I got from a man who's in his late 70's or his early 80's. His wife was a member of this congregation across the years, but for some reason known to him he dragged his feet and he just never got around to joining. He was a grand chap. And he wanted to surprise his wife when he decided to become a member of this congregation....and he wasn't quite sure if he could have the satisfaction of knowing, if I'd call on the phone or if he'd call me on the phone, if he'd have the privacy that he would like.

....so he wrote me a letter, a registered letter, and in that letter he said, "I've made up my mind to join the church and I'd love to surprise Edna. Now I don't want her to know anything about it, and I need to have a conference with you when we can talk about it, but don't call me on the phone -- she might be around when you call me on the phone. Would you please write me a letter...and be careful with what you say."

Well, I obliged Mike and I wrote him that letter, and I thought that I had done exactly what he wanted done and he would get the message. And the next time I saw him he said - - "Reverend, that was a great letter you wrote me -- you didn't say a thing!"

....not so, however, with a letter that God would write.

God would speak plainly to us, lay it on the line. He'd tell us what He has done for us and what He expects in return. There'd be no question about it. Every now and then we need to speak plainly.

And the fourth thing that I can tell you about a letter that God would write to us, I think, would be this: it would be a pleading letter, it would be a cry for help. Now you never thought of it that way, did you? But did it ever occur to you that God wants His work to get on down here on earth, He wants it to progress, He wants it to advance. And in this letter that God would write to us He'd have us to understand that God's work is in our hands. He has no hands but our hands! . . . no feet but our feet! . . . no lips but our lips! We're the ones who determine the speed and the effectiveness by which God's work is done here on earth. And God would tell us that in a letter that He would write.

God's great concern is that the needs of His world should be met, because He is a God of love. And when we love someone we always want to see that that person's needs are met. And in this letter that God would write to us He'd give

us to understand very plainly as to how well we were doing, and how much more He would expect from us in the next year because we've grown in grace! We've matured! We're better equipped, mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually -- than we've ever been before.

I don't know what you think of the age 40. When I became 40 I hit it with a vengeance -- I was 40 when I became your Pastor. Life has always been meaningful for me, but it took on a brand new dimension when I reached 40. I began to feel as though I'd never really lived before. And ever since I have been 40 I have been drawing upon that experience, as though all of life had been a preparation for that period. And I'd like you to know that in these decades that have come so quickly since that time, I've shared my life in Christ with you. With a measure of fulfillment, I hope with a measure of commitment.

Now this congregation becomes 40 years of age in January, 1980, and in this letter that God would write to us He'd remind us of that. And I think He'd say, "I've brought you as a congregation to these four decades -- and now I need you more than ever, I shall count on you more than ever.

During the week you're going to get a letter. And it's not rank presumption, when you look at it for the first time it's going to read: "Like A Letter From God." I've never taken greater pains to write a letter. And you'll be invited to respond. When that return envelope in which your pledge card appears goes to Mrs. Mills, it has down on the left-hand side "In Response To Our Heavenly Father." For the work of Saint Luke congregation is not the work of Saint Luke Congregation -- it's God's work. And I dare say if any among you would be disturbed by the way it's very properly put, that there is need for an increase in giving next year due to inflation -- do not be overly disturbed. It is a fact of life, it is foolhardy for any person to believe that we can buy oil and electricity in 1980 at 1978 or 1979 prices. And that goes right across the board.

Speaking of letters, let me read this for you that I clipped from a neigh-

boring church's publication . . .

"A certain pastor on the occasion of the annual stewardship campaign wrote a letter to the members of his church, upon receipt of which one man replied immediately and with considerable rancor, "According to your concept," says the person who responded, "Christianity is just one continual give, give, give." Disturbed by this reaction, the pastor sat down to write a devastating reply. But as he thought and prayed about it, he found himself thinking, why that man is absolutely right! Christianity is one continual give!

Instead of a scorching letter of rebuke, the pastor wrote the following, "Dear friend, thank you for the finest definition of Christianity that I have ever seen. Christianity is one continual give, give, give. For that's the way it all began. God gave -- He gave His only Son! The Son gave -- He gave His life upon the cross for our sins. The disciples gave -- they left their homes and the twelve died a martyr's death. Down the centuries the work of Christ has prospered in proportion to the extent that Christians have learned to give, give, give. May all of us experience the great blessings and joy that results from a life that's characterized as give, give, give."

Saint Luke Church is where wonderful things are always happening, because we have all kinds of people who day in and day out, in one way or another, are doing nothing but giving....and giving....and giving.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"WRITE A LETTER FROM GOD"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

I am II Timothy

Tell me now, what part of the Bible do you enjoy reading most? The answer, of course, you'd like according to your particular need, or your own individual temperament or personality. By your leave I'd like to tell you what I'm thoroughly enjoying re-discovering these days -- the letters that are found in the Bible.

There are letters there, you know, and among them the letters that Paul, that great advocate for Jesus Christ, who went here and there and established congregations, and always wanted to keep in touch with them. That's one reason why we write letters, isn't it? -- just to keep in touch.

Within the last month, perhaps six weeks. I have concentrated upon one of the letters that he wrote, to a young friend called Timothy. I'm absolutely amazed at the truth that's revealed when age speaks to youth, and the kind of thing that Paul talks about, and especially when he lays down the measure of a man -- the mind of a disciple Jesus wants from all of us. It's good reading -- check it out for yourself. And if you do well on the first one, go on to the Second Letter that he wrote to Timothy.

Speaking of letters, they've always fascinated me. When I have time, I like to write them, and surely I've always enjoyed receiving them....and particularly when they're a personal letter, and when I know the person from whom they come and I have a high regard for the writer.

I have kept a file of letters across the years. Do you mind if I tell you that one of them I prize greatly was written by one of the most gracious women ever to occupy the White House -- Lou Henry Hoover once wrote me a letter. I

always prize a letter that her husband wrote me after he had been President, when he was living in the Waldorf Towers in the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel section in New York City. One of the most precious letters I ever received was a letter that only had two sentences -- told what it had to tell...that was it.

Some letters are long, some are brief. In the mail yesterday I got a letter saying, surprisingly so, -- "This may be the longest letter you've ever received, and we encourage you to read every sentence." It was a long letter, and the introduction didn't turn me off....but rather, to the contrary, it motivated me to read to the very end.

No letter, I think, I've ever received, aside from those that Winifred has written me across the years - - - you must be very patient with me -- the letters that I received from my mother. And the one that I cherish more than any other is a letter written in her own hand, addressed in her own hand. She didn't have much beyond a fourth-grade education. When I became your Pastor 24 years ago, the very fact that I'd be living near the Nation's Capital shook her up. She thought I'd be surrounded by highly intelligent people and highly sophisticated people. Bless her soul -- be patient now! -- she was embarrassed to have a letter come to 9100 Colesville Road written in her poor workmanship. And do you know what that godly woman did? . . . she went to the town printer and purchased 500 envelopes with my name and address printed on them so that her son Raymond would not be embarrassed by her penmanship!

Small wonder that we prize certain letters that we receive from certain people, because like as not the letter that we get indicates the integrity and the strength of character of the person who does the writing.

Speaking of letters, in recent weeks I have been concentrating upon this -- a noble idea, I dare say - - - if God were to write you a letter! Or better still if God were to write a letter to every single member of this congregation!

- - that's a bold idea, isn't it?

...and suppose He did. What would He be like? He'd like to answer you as least I can.

I think it would be a very personal letter. Letters that come most to us are always personal letters, written to us by someone who knows us, and that's surely true of God. He'd know us by name, He'd go on to say, "I know how you got your name -- it was given to you in your baptism . . . and I know what that name means. The world looks upon it as your Christian name, and that's no small thing!" -- God would say to us,

"I know how at one time in your life," as God continues to tell us in this letter that He could write to us, "How having reached the age of reason you stood up publicly and in the presence of people and you professed My Son as Lord and Saviour. You never did anything more wonderful in your life."

God, writing a letter, would tell us that, wouldn't He? -- "You have never done anything more wonderful than when you stood up publicly and professed My Son as Lord and Saviour."

And I think in that letter that God would write us He'd ask us,

"Now what have you been doing with it since you did that? I know. Do you know how well you're measuring up? I assess My people by the measure of their devotion."

And that leads me to tell you the second thing that I think I can tell you about a letter that God would write you: It would be a love letter!

....say it honestly! -- the most precious letters that we've ever received have been love letters. Some day I can picture when Winifred and I face the sunset slope of life, the two of us just sitting down and going over these letters that we had written to each other -- when our love was young.

And what happens to a loved letter? -- you're always telling the person who's meant to receive the letter how much you love that person -- let there be no question about it -- and our lives are fortified, and our lives are shaped by the people who love us. And we need to be told that we're being loved repeatedly.

If God were to write us a letter He'd write us and tell us how much He loves us, what He's done for us, how He's proven His love.

...and then I think in that same letter He'd say, "How about your love for Me -- I know you love Me. But how often do you show your love for Me?" I think He would. I really do!

And the third thing I think I can tell you about that letter that God would write, if God were given to writing us a letter, it would be a plain-spoken letter. He'd get to the point without any reluctance. I get some letters, when I read them I try to say to myself, I wonder what the person's driving at, I wonder what this person is trying to say. Sometimes I've read a letter from the beginning to the end and I've never quite figured it out -- it's in such vague language....or perhaps even the language gets in its way. . . .

...not so with a letter that God would write! For God is given to plain-speaking.

I think I can tell you quite incidentally, I smile broadly when I think of a letter that I got from a man who's in his late 70's or his early 80's. His wife was a member of this congregation across the years, but for some reason known to him he dragged his feet and he just never got around to joining. He was a grumpy chap. And he wanted to surprise his wife when he decided to become a member of this congregation....and he wasn't quite sure if he could have the satisfaction of knowing, if I'd call on the phone or if He'd call me on the phone, if he'd have the privacy that he would like.

...so he wrote me a letter, a registered letter, and in that letter he said, "I've made up my mind to join the church and I'd love to surprise Edna. Now I don't want her to know anything about it, and I need to have a conference with you when we can talk about it, but don't call me on the phone -- she might be around when you call me on the phone. Would you please write me a letter...and be careful with what you say."

Well, I obliged Mike and I wrote him that letter, and I thought that I had done exactly what he wanted done and he would get the message. And the next time I saw him he said -- "Reverend, that was a great letter you wrote me -- you didn't say a thing!"

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"LIKE A DYING THIEF"

GRACE, Mercy and peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Luke 23:43

The title for today's sermon is "Like A Dying Thief" -- and the text is
from the 23rd chapter of the Gospel according to Luke, the 43rd verse:

"Lord, remember me when you come into
your Kingdom; and Jesus said to him,
Today you shall be with me in Paradise."

Every now and then God allows one person to loom upon the horizon who makes
his mark upon the fabric of the world's heart. Once that person has come, the
world can never again be as it was before his appearing. In my book, such a
man was the beloved Pope John 23rd. Short as his term in the papacy was, the
world has never been the same.

He was the kind of person who opened windows and allowed fresh air to come
in, and from his time onward, one of the grand and good things that's happened
in Christendom is that Roman Catholics and Greek Orthodox and Protestants have
talked with one another, have prayed with one another, have begun to share the
riches which together they know in the Kingdom, in the manner of which they had
never done it before.

Little did I realize when I began my ministry that I should live to see the
day when Roman Catholics would sing in their service on occasion Martin Luther's
"Ein' Feste Burg." Today in this congregation we celebrate in the Calendar of
the Church "Christ The King Sunday." Where did we get it? -- from our Roman
Catholic cousins, as we began to think with them and talked about the things
that we could share. Into our Calendar we now have this particular day known
as Christ The King Sunday.

You're perfectly aware of the fact that, human as we are, we need certain days when we emphasize certain fundamental truths. That's why we celebrate anniversaries, that's why we have certain days in the Calendar of the Church -- Christmas as an example . . .

.....every Christian ought to say to himself every day -- God came to me in Jesus Christ....Jesus Christ is God's supreme gift to me not simply to think of it at Christmas, the season of giving, alone.....

.....every Christian ought to say to himself, God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, and then this Christ suffered and died for me, and arose from the dead - - He lives!

-- every day we ought to say to ourselves, "Christ is alive in my soul!"....and not simply when we celebrate Easter.

Now I say to you as realistically as I can, is it possible, dare one assume, that every day you and I could look out upon this wicked world of ours and say, "Jesus Christ is King! Jesus Christ is Lord!" I would not have been at all shocked, if I had not been with you this morning, and I had perhaps gone elsewhere to worship and the preacher, against the sin which constitutes the background of the world in this present moment, if the preacher would have stood up at the pulpit and begun his sermon by saying, "The world is in a helluva mess!" I would not have been shocked.

Some of us remain unsettled today in a way that we have not been unsettled since World War II. We are nervous, we're edgy, we're wondering what might happen next. We brand him a fanatic, of course we do, and there's nothing more dangerous in the world as a fanatic who gets a hearing -- who can sway and influence people in all parts of the world.

Nor is there anything, perhaps, quite as dangerous and as despicable in its

"BY WAY OF PERSONAL TESTIMONY"

QUIET our minds and hush our hearts, O
God, and make us ready to give some
measure of undivided attention to Your
Word. Through Jesus Christ Thy Son, our
Lord, who when He came, came preaching.
Amen.

Ephesians 2:19

If it's a title for the sermon that you want, let me suggest this one:
"By Way of Personal Testimony" -- and the text is from the Letter that the
Apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians, the second chapter:

" . . . you are fellow citizens with the
saints and members of the household of God . . . "

If I understand the mind of Paul aright, he is trying to place before
those Christians who lived in Ephesus exactly who they are, as he wrote to them.
For the simple reason that it's only afterward, sometimes, that people begin to
appreciate what had been theirs.

On occasion the staff of Saint Luke Church knows the benefit of our retreat
house which is Bethany, the place across the years which has helped to transform
the face of this congregation, spiritually speaking. As we shared breakfast
there I placed before them the challenge that when one eats a meal, it's not
simply the food that's before him that's important, but it's also the kind of
conversation that's engendered -- sometimes far more important than the food is
the fellowship that you share when you break bread together.

Because I believe so strongly in this, I was not about to have us waste
our time in trivia, so I asked them, "As we eat this breakfast together, from
whatever angle you care to approach it, tell me what baptism means to you at this
stage of your life."

The first to speak responded in this manner. "Naturally I was baptized
when I was a child. I know nothing about the experience, as far as having been

an infant was concerned. But when I was on Tent Troupe I had the good fortune to go back to the place where I had been baptized, where I had been cradled in my parents' arms, and where I was named for Jesus Christ. It was only then that I began to appreciate as I did not appreciate it before what happened there, what it really meant, and what it ought to mean to me now."

Having said that, I suggest to you now that this is true of almost any experience. It's only afterward, granted God gives us the time and a good sense of perspective, that we enter into a true and valid appreciation for an experience that took place at an earlier time. I may have told you this before -- be patient with me if I remind you of it again, you can afford to hear it once more.

Being an ordained minister of the Gospel, I had the good fortune to be given the privilege to speak the last words when my mother was laid to rest. It was not an easy assignment from the standpoint of emotion....but as I spoke the words at the committal service and then walked away -- suddenly it occurred to me what I should always have known -- and which I presume I did know only to a degree -- that this was the woman, more so than any other person on the face of the earth, who first talked to me about God. It is only afterward, unfortunately, for many of us, that we ever see a thing in its proper perspective.

This is why we ought to walk very carefully through life, asking God to give us some true measure of sensitivity for what it is that's taking place now. For what would happen if our mental and other faculties should be destroyed, and we would not be given enough time to be able to call by its rightful name what it was that we actually experienced?

So I come to this sacred desk this morning to offer a word of personal testimony -- a good word for the Church of Jesus Christ. For as the years continue to come and go, I increasingly appreciate the meaning of the Church. I have little patience with people who say, "With Jesus it was so simple -- one person going around touching people's lives -- give me the old-fashioned religion of the Sermon on the Mount! Jesus I can accept -- but the Church -- it

gets in the way of my appreciation for Jesus Christ."

It's at this time in my life that I can tell you that I can understand what some people say when they talk like that. It may trouble me. I've had my moments when I began my ministry, when I could have walked away from the institutional church and invested my time and energy in people on a one-to-one basis -- to be free from any amount of responsibility that comes with keeping the organization of the church going smoothly. Dr. Franklin Clark Fry, of blessed memory, used to say that so much of his time and energy was spent just in squirting oil on the machinery of the Church so that it operated and worked smoothly. It takes a bit-of-doing to keep something working smoothly.

I once knew a chap who was caught up with the institutional church, and he said, "I've had it!" He packed his bags, and went over to Asia. It never occurred to him that that wonderful experience that he had in Asia was possible only because the Church, the institutional Church, paid his salary, met the needs of his family, sent him to language school, gave him an opportunity to grow and develop as a Christian and to provide meaningful service. I stand here at the sacred desk this morning to speak a good word for the Church of Jesus Christ -- and personally so.

Now indulge me for a moment as I reflect on a day such as this, the Sunday before Thanksgiving a half-century ago, when I walked out of our front door and I saw two men standing on the corner of Jordan Street and Washington in that little Pennsylvania town of three thousand people. I had been to church earlier in the morning, I had heard the preacher make the announcement: "This is the day when we're asking all of our members to stay home between the hours of 2:00 and 4:00 o'clock because your fellow members are going to make a visitation -- they're going to deliver your envelope packets for the coming year, they're going to deliver your pledge card."

Whether I ought to tell you all the things that I tell you or not may be

questionable.....at some risk I tell you this. It used to bother me the way my father responded. God bless him, he never fully adjusted to the ways of the Western world. He never completely shook off the culture of the Middle East which had influenced his life in his formative years. He never quite understood how the Church worked in America. And when those people, every November, that third Sunday, came around to knock on the door, he didn't have much sympathy. They were asking for money. Not that he didn't appreciate what the Church meant, but for some strange reason it never occurred to him that the Church couldn't do its work unless people helped to advance its cause. That pledge card got in the way for him. So that's why with a measure of strength I come to this sacred desk this morning in his behalf, to make up for his inadequacy (God forbid) -- to tell you how wonderful I feel about the Church of Jesus Christ and the privilege that's given to us to fulfill the obligation that rests upon us.

Now those two men who stood on that corner had their envelope packets to be delivered. It's only a half-century afterward that I begin to see as I had never seen it before, just what it was that they were really doing. They were knocking on doors and saying to people:

"We have a stake in the most wonderful thing in the
world -- to expand the borders of the Kingdom
here on earth...

-- we have a stake in the most wonderful thing in the
world -- to be in this world today as the mind
and spirit, the heart and the hands of Jesus Christ . . "

I speak a personal word when I tell you in my book I see it as the extension of Jesus Christ in the world today! -- doing all those things today that Jesus Christ embraced when He was here on earth.

Now these two men who knocked on our door were simply inviting the people who lived at 400 Jordan Street to have a share, to participate in the ongoing work of the Kingdom.

I don't know how you look upon it, but when you sign your pledge card and when you put it in that envelope, don't wait for half-a-century from now to appreciate what you're really doing. See it now in its proper perspective if at all possible. You're making possible the kind of thing that you experience in and through this congregation, where people keep the God-dimension alive! You're aware of that, aren't you? Every time we come together we deal with the God-factor in our lives.....every time we come together we share something of the love of Jesus Christ.....

.....every time we come together we see one another
as an object of God's love....

.....every time we come together we appeal to the
better side of each other's nature....

I used to say if I didn't belong to the Church for any other reason, aside from my response to Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, I'd want to belong to the Church because people such as you keep me from going to Hell.

We always appeal, by the grace of God, to the fact that each of us is a child of God, meant to love and to serve in this world as His obedient children. The Church is the only fellowship on the face of the earth that I know of that's given to this sort of thing.

And furthermore, I speak a word of praise for the Church because the Church is the only group of people on the face of the earth that to all intents and purposes exists for the people who don't belong to her! Even when we equip ourselves, spiritually speaking, even when you and I grow in the knowledge of God's love and have our vision increased, we don't do it just for our own selfish satisfaction. We do it in order to better witness in the name of Jesus Christ to all of the people who have ever crossed the threshold of a church. I wish I could go on and on....

I sing the praise of the Church for that woman -- it was through the

Church that she knocked on our door in that little village not far from Montoursville -- my mother was ill. The six of us were not getting to Sunday School. She knocked on the door and said, "These six Shaheen kids ought to be in Sunday School." And that's how we got in the Lutheran Church -- a woman whose name I never have known! When I get to Heaven, she's one person I'm going to look for and say thank you.

I sing the praise of the Church for those people who taught me in Sunday School....for that Godly pastor who suggested that I think in terms of the ministry, by which I've come to know people such as you, to whom I can devote my energies in a company such as this.

.....I sing the praise of the Church because it was the Church that helped me get my education, saw me through college and theological seminary...

.....I sing the praise of the Church because in and through the Church

I have found a people to whom I can relate, to always remind me that I'm a child of God, and I belong to the Family.

And every time you and I sign a pledge card -- really now, see it in proper perspective today -- we're helping to support and advance this sort of thing. That's why I'm ecstatic about it! That's why as long as God gives me breath I'll sing the praise of Jesus Christ and the Church, which is His Body, which is His Bride, which is His building -- of which all of us are meant to be part.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

own way when someone has been accused of exploiting his people and taking with him what they say has been rightfully theirs. And as over against that, to deal in this whole image-making business, where the other person is the personification of evil . . . and we are blameless.

Against the background of a world such as that, can I come to you this morning and ask you to think in terms of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ? One is reminiscent of the time when Jesus Christ appeared before Pilate, and they had this encounter, this banter backwards and forwards, and then Pilate says, "Ah, but you are a king!" And Jesus Christ said, "You said it." But then He gave him to understand that His Kingdom was not of this world.

Deposed kings are a dime-a-dozen. In company with some of you I look back and think how carefully the stage was just right -- I shook hands with a king once...a little bit of a fellow, with a string of titles that seemed endless. But they got rid of him...his titles didn't mean much. Who was the ruling monarch not so long ago who said, "I reign, but I do not rule." We're not kindly disposed toward kings and queens in this day and age. Figure-heads, maybe -- yes. But to have them rule, to dominate -- dictate -- -- no. Yet the figure remains: Jesus Christ -- King of Kings, Lord of Lords -- -- dare you say it? Dare you believe it? Are we a handful of people on the face of the earth who still believe in the Lordship of Christ?

I am reminded, impressionable as I was when I first began to think in terms of World War I -- how when the American President, the son of a parsonage, went to Paris . . . they began to think in terms of what the world would be like and what ought to be done once the peace treaty had been signed. When Woodrow Wilson advanced what he thought was his noble proposals, there was a world leader from Europe who said to him cynically, "You speak like Jesus Christ."

As I stand at this sacred desk I think of that Pope who headed the Roman Catholic Church back in 1925 . . . and that's where we got the idea of Christ The King Sunday, by the way. He looked out over the world as he knew it in his day,

he thought in terms of its being re-built, nation after nation. We do have a way of re-couping, you know. But Pope Pius 11th issued a papal decree in which he said, "It will all be for nought, this re-building, unless we re-build the world under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. That's why he introduced to the Roman Catholic Church in 1925 what ought to appear in the Calendar of the Church as Christ The King Sunday, that Christians should remind themselves repeatedly that Jesus Christ is King.

Pope Pius 11th had a strange bed-fellow, as the years would reveal, in George Bernard Shawe, that crochety old character whose writings usually fascinated me. Reflecting on this very thing, it was Bernard Shawewho said, "I am no more of a Christian then Pilate was, or you, gentle reader, and yet like Pilate I greatly prefer Jesus to Annas or Caiaphas. And yet I am ready to admit that after contemplating the world and human nature for nearly sixty years, I see no way out of the world's misery but the way which would have been found by Christ's will if He had undertaken the work of a modern practical statesman." . . . testimony, no less, from Bernard Shawe, of all people, but would we have allowed Him to be cast in the role of a modern practical statesman, would we then have followed Him?

C. S. Lewis maintains that when one thinks about Jesus Christ, as he remembers the reaction in the day of Jesus Christ, there were only three reactions to Jesus Christ in His day: hatred.....terror.....adoration. Nowhere would the Biblical scholar find any evidence of simple, mild approval. You either hate Jesus Christ -- you're terrified by Jesus Christ -- or you adore Him. Are we numbered among those who adore Him as King and who believe His Kingdom is an everlasting one?

Now to get back to the text: A dying thief says to Jesus Christ: "Remember me" . . . and Jesus said to him, "Today - - you shall be with me in Paradise." I suggest to you the world is like a dying thief. And what is it like to be a dying thief? -- someone for whom time is running out, and a thief is one who

has lived at the expense of other people. The world is like a dying thief. I have my moments when I honestly believe that time is running out for us. Five years ago I read Robert Heilbrunner's (?) "Inquiry Into The Human Prospect" -- it was not very pleasant reading. He surveyed the human scene. He comes to his final chapter . . . is there any hope for us? He could not see our changing our life-style. The only hope that he saw would come through from some catastrophic event in which God Himself, perhaps, even though he did not refer to God as such, would drive us to our knees.

Be patient with me, I am still rooted and grounded in the Gospel. I know in whom I believe. Like Eric Severeid, if you were to ask me, Are you hopeful about tomorrow? -- I would have to say No, I am not hopeful about tomorrow...but I am hopeful about the day-after-tomorrow.

....someone once said to Martin Luther, "What would you do if you knew that tomorrow the world was coming to an end?"
....another way of saying time was running out....

...Martin Luther said, "I would plant a tree."
...which is just another way of saying, I am hopeful, not about tomorrow, but the day-after-tomorrow.

The world is like a dying thief. Time is running out for us, and a thief is one who lives at the expense of other people. We've exploited our natural resources -- at the expense of generations yet to come. We pass all kinds of legislation in order to spend money today -- at the expense of generations yet to come. The world is like a dying thief -- for whom time is running out, and who has lived at the expense of other people.

I would do you a disservice if I ended the sermon on this note. It was that dying thief who reached out to Jesus Christ and saw in Him a hope -- and to Him he said, "Remember me." Christians are people who reach out to Jesus Christ as they find themselves in a world that's running out of steam. And Jesus Christ responds by saying, "Alright, today -- today it can begin to happen. It doesn't

have to go on like this forever. The drift toward Hell can be stemmed, it can be stayed. There is always the possibility of Paradise." As earnestly as I can, let me suggest to you what you ought to believe in, what you ought to recognize without my calling it to your attention: every time you come to church and give Jesus Christ adoration, every time you sign a pledge card and support the work of the Lord Jesus Christ you're establishing in no uncertain way a stake in the Kingdom, you're investing in a future that's meant to be better than yesterday and today. Said Jesus Christ, "Today it can begin to happen."

Why, for the life of me I'll never quite understand, we believe in the power of God in the past . . . I once went to a meeting and I could hardly believe the answer when someone asked and was given the answer -- here was the question: Do you believe that God was more active in the world centuries ago, say in the time of the Bible, than He is now?....and almost to a person the people who gathered in that room said, Yes, God was more alive then. That's a fallacious notion. God is forever active, and we do Him an injustice when we imprison Him in the past.

By the very same token there are those who live and think that God some day will do something great in some far-off event -- I cannot limit God to the future, any more than I can limit Him to the past. Said Jesus Christ to the dying thief, for whom time was running out -- "Today, something can be done -- today, I offer you this hope."

I am a brooding optimist, I am not happy with what I see everywhere. But I am overjoyed by what I discover here and there, in people such as you, as an example, who believe in the Lordship of Jesus Christ -- Who builds His Church against which even the gates of Hell cannot prevail. It may not be easy to believe this.....but I refuse to settle for the alternative.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"THE SHEPHERDS AND THE CHRISTMAS TRUTH"
(Luke 2: 10-11)

THE WORLD is too much with us, O God,
You know that better than we do. And
that's why a long, long time ago it was
said to us, we should be made quiet --
in order to know who you are. To that
end we offer ourselves responsible to Your
Holy Spirit as we give some measure of
undivided attention to Your Word. In the
name of Jesus Christ, who when He came,
came preaching. Amen.

The next time you either read a letter that's sent to you or write one
that you're sending to somebody else, give some concern, how are you being
addressed, and how are you addressing someone else? And also give some concern
to the way the letter is about to be concluded -- how do you sign it?

We have a friend at the Parsonage, 919 Highland Drive, who when she writes
us, never says: "Dear Pastor and Winifred" -- she just starts speaking. It's
so typical of her personality -- she starts right off.....because, I suppose
it occurred to her that when she sees us on the street or when she greets us
at the house, she doesn't begin by saying, "Dear Pastor and Winifred" -- an
idiosyncrasy of hers, I suppose. But by the same token, you pay some attention
to your opening salutation in your letters -- what do you desire to say when
you write.....or even more importantly, when you conclude?

Some people wrestle with this. They're not too easily satisfied with
Sincerely -- as good a word as this may be -- or Respectfully, or Cordially.
I have another friend -- his idiosyncrasy-of-sorts is that he's obsessed with
the specific. If he's invited to attend a meeting, he wants to know exactly
what it is that's going to appear on the agenda....he wants to know who is going
to be there....he not only wants to know when the meeting's going to begin, but
he also wants to know when it's going to conclude. He is specifically oriented.

....blood cousin of his, I suppose, could well be that person that I recall so well who was the kind of person, if you would say to her, "Now you must come to our house for dinner sometime" -- she'd say, "When?" -- "Let's pin this thing down -- let's be specific!"

My friend who is oriented specifically could well afford to sign his letters "Specifically Yours" -- as to suggest that while I'm writing you I don't have anybody else in mind -- and what I am saying I am saying specifically to you . . . a happy thought, honestly.

Which leads me to suggest to you now: a new way of thinking of Christmas: Christmas is God's love letter to you, which He signs "Specifically yours."

The text to which we will be referring repeatedly until Advent is over and Christmas is upon us: the 10th and the 11th verses of the 2nd chapter of the Gospel according to Luke:

"And the angel said to them, Be not afraid, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which shall be to all people; for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour who is Christ the Lord."

If that text is anything, it is surely a case study in specifics. It's not an announcement being made in general: "To Whom It May Concern" -- it's not a letter being addressed proverbially to "Occupant" -- to "Resident." But as the old King James had it and had it so well: "to certain shepherds who were abiding in the field by night, keeping watch over their flock, the angel of the Lord appeared to them . . . " And if you're numbered among those of us who when they read the Bible, they keep their pencil in hand and they underline certain phrases and certain words -- what a time we'd have with this text!"

" . . for unto you is born this day, in the city of David --
a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord . . "

.....dealt specifically.

When I read the Bible from cover to cover as I am wont to do, I try to ask myself, now what is the lasting impression that I have at this time? The last time I did this I went away with the very pleasant thought that again and again and again God deals specifically with us. History is something more than trends and forces and numbers, while these are always present in history; but history is basically written because certain things happen -- specifically, in certain places, with certain people involved....because a certain something is being resolved, emerging -- not being ignored, being dealt with.

When God saw fit to come to us, meeting a need in our souls, He came specifically in the form of Jesus Christ. You are not forgetting, are you, that there was that moment when the disciples came to Jesus and laid bare a need that's common to all of us? -- when they said to Jesus, "Show us the Father and we will be satisfied."

....in the minds of too many people God is a great blur

....in the minds of too many people God is like a basic plan

that's operative in the world

....in the minds of many people God is an abstract truth, In the

deep need of the heart we're not sustained by the abstract. There comes a time when it has to be specific.

It's not enough to say that we come into a world where there will be love -- God needs a father and a mother with outstretched arms to receive that child! -- to become the personification of Love. It's not enough to believe that we live in a world where truth will prevail....there comes a time when we need to be confronted by people who are truthful -- when the abstract becomes concrete. God recognized the basic need of the human heart - - so much so that God so loved that He gave -- Himself -- in human form. And that's why when the disciples came to Jesus: "We will be satisfied if only we can see God!" -- Jesus so magnificently could say, "Well, look at Me." To this end was He born and to this end

He gave Himself, that men might never again have to wonder what God is like and how God deals with us.

Christmas is God's love letter to the world. Ah, I can say it even better than that! -- Christmas is God's love letter to you, signed: "Specifically yours"you never appreciate the Gospel truth until you apply it specifically.

In all likelihood during the 11:00 o'clock service there will be two people present here who have never been here before. And for a certainty they will come and no one in this congregation will know exactly who they are. They're known only to me by way of a telephone conversation that occurred repeatedly yesterday. In mid-morning the call came. "Are you the Pastor of Saint Luke Church?"

"Yes."

"My daughter and I have come from a small town in Ohio. She's taken the examination, she's been given a job with the Justice Department. We're staying in a motel in Rosslyn. I cannot leave town," says the mother, "until I am satisfied that my daughter has some place to live."don't take me to task now, you may think I should never have asked this question so soon in the conversation, but I needed it for my orientation with her:

"How did you happen to call us?"

Said the mother, "We know no one in this area -- no one. We're troubled. We looked for the paper, we saw your advertisement in the morning paper and yours had a telephone number. By the way, which Pastor am I talking with?"so the conversation continued, again and again and again until late afternoon as I tried to see that their need would be satisfied. Traveling all this distance, they have come this way honestly believing that maybe God could help them. You and I believe that! But God helps only as there are specific people who come into the picture. And that's, now, where we are being used specifically by God. And sometime today we'll have to wrestle with this problem specifically: do we find a place or don't we find a place? The cry of need is being heard not

just generally...but the number that was dialed was a specific number: 588-4363.and the congregation to whom the appeal for help was made is a specific congregation - - not just Christians in general. Did it ever occur to you how in the time of need it has to be met specifically.

That's what happened at Christmas. God decided to do something specifically. He spoke to certain people, He used some people specifically -- like a Mary and a Joseph. The announcement did not come to people in general but it came specifically -- to shepherds keeping watch over their flock by night. Suppose the shepherds would have said to themselves, "O, we just happened to tune in, we just happened to hear this conversation taking place in the ethereal waves, it must be meant for somebody else".....or suppose they would have said, "Instead of going to Bethlehem as the instruction gave us, we'll go somewhere else." Again and again and again God deals in the specific.

God grant my desire to go to Heaven, not because of any merit of my own, but because of the saving grace of Jesus Christ.....I should like to meet one day that lay leader of a church in England who one day conducted the service in the absence of the vicar. And when the time came for the hour of service to begin specifically, there was only one other person present. And that teenager was not inclined to go to church that snowy Sunday morning, but he found the claim of God upon his soul irresistible and he went. And then to his amazement, to find himself the only person present, he sat in the back as far as he could. But that lay leader, God bless him, conducted that service as though the church was filled with people - - with only one slight variation. All the time he was delivering the meditation he kept pointing his finger at that fellow back there, and he said: " - - and this is meant for you" . . . " - - this is meant for you!" " -- this is meant for you!" And that was the gist of the whole presentation. And that teenager grew up to become Charles Haddon Spurgeon, one of England's greatest preachers, whose influence in all parts of Christendom is being felt to

this very day.....because, God bless him, that lay leader applied the truth of the Gospel specifically, and the person to whom it was being applied responded specifically.

There comes a time in the Christian experience when a person has to recognize that what is meant for each of us is meant specifically. And to all intents and purposes, every sermon that's worth preaching is a sermon that's preached for commitment, or response.

Paul Scherer, the prince of the pulpit, once said what I am now about to read to you, and once I've read it there is no need for further comment.

"When the hymns are sung, and the responsive
readings are over;
when the sermon is at an end, and the prayers
are quite finished, and the knees are brushed off;
when the committees have all met, and the plans
are all made;
God writes NOW over the whole thing.
Keep changing what He writes, and it will read: NEVER."

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"MARY HAD A BABY"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Luke 2:16

The title for this sermon being preached on this Sunday nearest Christmas is "Mary Had A Baby," and the text, familiar words from the second chapter of the Gospel according to Luke:

"Fear not, for unto you is born this day
in the city of David a Saviour which is
Christ the Lord . . .

. . . and they came with haste and found
Mary . . . and the baby lying in a manger."

The world has been likened to many things. Let me suggest for the moment that the world is like a blundering stage-hand. Now isn't that a strange thing to say, or is it? Bear with me now as I recall for you how a group of people were corralled together, at the suggestion of the parish pastor, that perhaps in a very dramatic way they could interpret for the little congregation the real meaning of Christmas. So they were assigned their parts, the stage was set, the costumes were designed.

It was the intention of the director that the impact was to be made at a precise moment, after there would have been a cacaphony of sounds and quite an interplay of variegated lights, there should be stark silence, without any movement at all -- and all the lights in the room were to be extinguished except one, which was intended to be a scarcely discernable ray of light to be focused, of course, upon the Christ-child in the manger.

When the night came, all went well until this precise point . . . a blundering stage-hand turned off all the lights, and there were those in the audience who heard the voice of the director saying, "Hey, you -- get that light back on the Baby Jesus!"

Christmas, properly understood, is God focusing the light of the eternal truth and love upon a Baby. But the world is like a blundering stage-hand -- that again and again and again has a way of switching off all the lights and concentrating upon the total darkness - - if not the total darkness, then certainly the shadows that fall upon this troubled world.

We have a way of focusing, you see, upon the dark things of life. He was a wise man one time who called his staff of reporters into his office -- he was the Editor -- and he applied to them, I presume, a test-of-tests. To each of them he gave what looked like a blank piece of paper, but in the center was a small dot, as black as coal. And to each of them in turn he said, "Now, what do you see?" And every single one of them said, "A black dot." He immediately took them to task -- he said, "Is that all you see? Don't you see that 99 and 99/100 th percent of that page is perfectly clear! But you are focusing upon the black dot! -- as though that were the only thing!"

....the world is like a blundering stage-hand, that has a way of allowing us to focus, if not upon the total darkness, then upon the shadows that engulf us.

If Christmas means anything at all, surely it must mean this: how God focused a light, that Night of Nights, upon a Baby. Significantly enough, this is the International Year of the Child, and we do well to focus our attention upon a child.

Some years back I presume, the Religion Editor of NEW YORK TIMES could have taken a double take when he was reading the titles of sermons to be preached in New York City. And had he been a student of history, in all likelihood he would have called the office of Riverside Church in Manhattan and said to the secretary, "I think there must be a mistake in the copy that you supplied us -- I see that your preacher is scheduled to preach on the Sunday nearest Christmas, upon a sermon entitled: "The Decisive Babies of History" . . . and if the Religion

Editor wanted to do it, he could have said, "I'm a student of history, and I know one of the most important volumes in history was written by a writer-historian (*creasy*) who wrote about 'The Decisive Battles of History' - - surely you've mis-typed it, haven't you?"

....and the secretary in the office could reply: "No, not at all. For it's the intention of our preacher to focus the attention of our people upon the important babies that came into the world, and how they have to all intents and purposes been the hinge of history."

The point is well taken. We think the course of the world is determined by the battles that have been fought. With all the strength that I can command this morning as I stand at this sacred desk, I would declare to you that the course of history has been determined by certain babies that have been born, and the potential that lies within them.

It's far more relevant this Christmas, perhaps, than we have had for a long, long time - - reflect now upon the fact that in the day when Jesus was born, the man whose name presumably was on the lips of most people was Caesar Augustus, the ruler who determined what was going to happen in that world. Today, the Western world at least, the Ayatollah Khomeini is a man whose name is upon the lips of many of us, as we survey the international scene, as we think of how his eccentricities can determine our course, touching almost every facet of our economic life!and we tremble.

Did it ever occur to you that God is always a generation ahead of us -- 30-40-50-60 years ago God had this kind of crisis in mind that we'd have to face. God allowed to have been born at that time a baby here and a baby there, who in this day and age would be in a position of responsibility to echo and reflect as best they could the mind of God that could be brought to bear in a crisis such as this. God does not intend His world to go to Hell . . . and God does not intend any

fanatic, no matter how religious, presumably, he may see himself to be, to send us to Hell. God is always a generation ahead of us. God deals in babies -- in whom lies the potential for what we need when the crisis of the next generation will be at hand.

You who are students of the Bible, you should draw comfort in the realization that when the Children of Israel were in bondage, all of those people down there were talking about the tyrant Pharaoh, the dictator -- his despicable behavior making pure hell for them. Little did they realize that at that very time there was a mother cradling a baby in her arms, fashioning a cradle for him, lining it with pitch and putting it in the Nile River....wondering what might happen to her baby. God had His eye on that baby. And that baby Moses became God's instrument through whom He would work in the crisis that they had to face.

In our own time, as we turn the pages of our history and the history of other parts of the world -- the year 1809 was not a very pleasant year for the world. The tiny giant, Napoleon Bonaparte, cast his shadow in a dread way throughout the Western world. But in the year 1809 God had His eye on a baby -- you are right, that's the year Abraham Lincoln was born....that's the year William Gladstone was born....that's the year Cyrus McCormick, the great inventor, was born...that's the year Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy . . . that's the year Charles Darwin was born . . . that's the year Edgar Allen Poe was born . . .

-- God had His eye on a baby. But the world can be like a blundering stage-hand that takes its eye off the light that God focuses upon a child.

What was that year when the troops came, in Italy -- there was insurrection. Some mothers with their babies sought refuge within the church. And the hostile ones came and even killed the babies within the shadow of an altar. There was a mother with a baby in her arms who hid in the belfry -- his name was Verdi, the great composer. Who remembers in this way who the hostile ones were, or even the battle that was at stake at that time? . . . but we still are thrilled when

we hear Aida . . . Il Trovatore . . . God is always a generation ahead of us, focusing His eye upon a baby.

That's what you and I need to remember today. Distraught as we are with what we see, with the darkness settling in upon us on every side . . . God was at work 20 years ago, 30 years ago -- 50 years -- 60 years ago - - - keeping this day in mind.

I subscribe to infant baptism, you know very well that I do, because I recognize the teaching of the Lutheran theology in this regard. But if I did not as a theologian subscribe to infant baptism, I think I would subscribe to it for this reason: when a set of parents cradle a baby in their arms, the child is being baptized - - the God-perspective is being introduced. God has something to do with this child. We, the parents and sponsors, are in duty bound to treat this child as God's ray of hope for the next generation, as a sign and token that God has not given up on His world as long as babies are being born - - God reminds us of a tomorrow.

You may say to yourself - -

-- but I'm not an Abraham Lincoln....

You may say to yourself - -

-- I'm not an Edgar Allen Poe....

-- I am not a Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy...

-- I'm not a Cyrus McCormick....

-- I'm not a William Gladstone....

Of course you may not be. But you and I must never forget that once we come into this world God can use us, to help make possible the great ones, to provide the climate and the environment in which they can function. Every baby is important, no matter how troubled and difficult the scene may be.

As comforting as anything that I've ever read is what I now recall for you.

I can't remember exactly the tragedy that had come to southern Italy, but a tragedy it was. And round about on every side people saw nothing but devastation. They were completely forlorned. The only thing that gave them hope, was suddenly there appeared on the streets of that devastated village a cassock-clad priest, carrying in his arms a baby.

When you come to church tomorrow night you will do well to read very carefully what appears on the front page of your folder. God has a way of slipping into this world when nobody seems to be looking. He did it that Night of Nights when He came down the stairs of Heaven with a Baby in His arms.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"CHRISTMAS IS CHRISTMAS"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son, Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Deidh 9:7

Down deep in the heart of every single one of us the child remains, no matter what our age may be. And the child within us always has a way of remembering, remembering never more so, I suggest to you, than at Christmas-time.

I travel quickly memory's lane, and think of the Christmases of my childhood. I dealt with two questions:

When will it be Christmas? In that home in which I grew up, Christmas never came until Christmas morning. Our parents, they put up the Christmas tree after we had gone to bed on Christmas Eve. They did all the trimming, they put the presents under the tree. And then we were awakened Christmas Day in the morning -- thrilled -- it was Christmas!

The mother of your Associate Pastor remembers how when her parents came in from the barn, having done the chores, she heard music -- for it was a matter of tradition in her home that a brand new record for the victrola would be purchased at Christmas-time, and when that record was being played -- then it was Christmas, and they too came down and celebrated. But not until then.

That was the first question: When will it be Christmas?

And the second question, of course:

When will Christmas be over? For a youngster going to school, Christmas was over when we had to go back and the vacation period was ended.

When is Christmas over? For some people who come to church,

Christmas is over when the last Christmas carol is sung...for the man who pays the bills in the household, Christmas is over when the last bill for the Christmas gifts has come...for the housewife, Christmas is over, perchance, when all the turkey has been consumed -- the turkey soup, the turkey salad.

When will Christmas be over? What a pity that the thoughts of childhood should cripple us as we become mature, for to think in such terms as: when will it be Christmas? - and - when will Christmas be over? is to do God an injustice. For according to God's interpretation, Christmas was never meant to be something that came and something that went. The title for tonight's sermon was carefully chosen, and particularly the verb: CHRISTMAS IS CHRISTMAS -- the verb is in the present tense.

That's precisely what Christmas is intended to mean for all of us, according to the mind of God. Long before Christmas occurred, as the prophet predicted it, this is the way Isaiah said it: "Of the increase of his government and of his peace there will be no end from this time forth and forevermore. . . " In the mind of God, Christmas is forever. It's a happening that's always going on -- it's now....today....and forever.

That's what makes Christmas unique - - because it reveals to us the kind of thing that God is always up to. Christmas is so distinctively God-like. After all, Christmas was God's idea, you know. He thought it up. We didn't. Christmas is so like God. There are some things that are exactly the way they ought to be, and Christmas is one of those things.

I remember Albert Einstein, and as I remember him I think of three things in particular.....

-- I think of the time I stepped off the pavement into the street to allow him to pass, when I was in Princeton one summer.....

-- I remember also reading about Albert Einstein when he went one time to a particular meeting and they had him sit on the platform, and the chair-

man exploited the occasion and turned to the professor and said, "We're glad that you're here -- we'd be very happy if you'd say something." And the professor stood up and startled the audience by saying, "I don't have anything to say to you." . . . what a wonderful thing if every preacher, every speaker, could be that honest! . . . and the professor said, " -- but perhaps you'll invite me again, and then I may have something to say to you at that time."

-- The third thing that I remember about Albert Einstein was what was written up in the pages of TIME Magazine when he became the recipient of one of those many honorary degrees conferred upon him. As creative a bit of writing, I dare say, as anything that occurs on the printed page is the kind of thing that happens when the kudos are written -- someone is assigned that responsibility of being able to put in a sentence or two all that the distinguished person represents, all that he is. You know how it is done.

When it came to the day when Albert Einstein was receiving this particular honorary degree, the presenter simply said, perfectly and superbly: "Albert Einstein is Albert Einstein." - - nothing else could be said.

...everything was said when it was said that way.

And I suggest to you, when you say Christmas is Christmas, you've said it -- everything that needs to be said about Christmas is said that way.

Notice again the verb: Christmas is Christmas -- God's ongoing event. For God is always coming to us....

- God is always trying to invade this world which He made
- God always wants to make Himself known to us
- God always wants to love us
- God is always drawing near to us, whether we want Him to or not
- God is always coming to us, whether we're ready or not

And when God comes to us, it's always in order to meet our need.

What comfort would you get tonight if I came to tell you about a God who had done something in the past? Small comfort indeed to talk about a God who had been.

Among the great moments of my life I listened to a man who came to America after he had spent nine-and-a-half years as the personal prisoner of Adolph Hitler, confined in a tiny cell, and for most of those years in solitary confinement....

....some of us made bold to have the question put to him in the question-and-answer period as he spoke to us after that experience --"What was it that meant most to you throughout that whole experience?" He answered as only he could answer: "The realization that Jesus Christ was there in that cell with me!"

It would have been a small measure of comfort to talk to him about a God who had been.....a God who was. Christmas reminds us of the God who is.

The greatest definition for God consists of three words, and every single Sunday School scholar remembers: God is love. It's in the present tense, you see. Love in the past tense has no meaning at all. It doesn't do anything for a person to say, "I loved you once." Love in the past tense has no meaning at all.

-- Love in the past tense does not inspire

-- Love in the past tense does not motivate

-- Love in the past tense does not bring a blessing

-- Love in the past tense does not meet a present need

Love, to be love, must always be in the present tense.

I cringe when I think of that ballad that's being sung these days -- I'll grant you it's a perfectly beautiful tune that's being wasted on that horrible sentiment -- how does it go -- "Please let me go, I don't love you any more."? It's a travesty to think of love in terms such as that! For love, to be love, must always be something that's in the present tense. Since God is love -- Christmas is Christmas.

I've gone to Bethlehem, in company with some of you -- I've known a measure

of satisfaction in worshipping in the Church of the Holy Nativity....I've known an impression to be made upon the fabric of my heart when I've gone to the Shepherds' Fields, presumed to be the place where the angelic chorus was first heard.but that deals with something that happened -- two thousand years ago. But what if I could not have gone to that particular place, would Christmas have less meaning for me? I tell you something that should warm the cockles of the heart of every single one of you who walks upon this holy ground repeatedly -- for again and ever so often as I come to you on a Sunday morning, I've felt the nearness of God as I've looked into the eyes of some of you and know full well that in that present moment you've made your heart a constant Bethlehem!

Thomas Merchant, bless his soul, said, not too long before he died, to some of his colleagues: "What a lamentable thing that most of us have never really understood what Christmas really is.! Christmas, I tell you, is Christmas -- just because it's God in the present tense. All that God revealed at Christmas-time He's continually showing to us. The Apostle Paul said it magnificently: "In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." The past has already happened, and it's continuing now. Christmas is God's calling card to the human race. Christmas is God, caring enough to give the very best -- once and forever. God has nothing more up His sleeve. He's already done it, in Christmas -- which is continuing action.

You need to hear this legend before you leave tonight. It's only a legend, but it makes its point exceptionally well. The title of the legend is "The Last Name."

He who first wrote the name wrote it at the end of the list, below every name already written. The man was a Roman officer, he was charged with the duty of the census in the district about Bethlehem...

All day long the line of tired pilgrims had gone by his desk. At last the wearying record was completed. And the officer sat himself down comfortably, and in a relaxed kind of way looked back over all the names that he had recorded, presumably saying to himself: Thank heavens

that the day's work is done -- this is it!

....then suddenly a shadow fell across the page. He turned impatiently toward the doorway to see the figure of a stalwart man outlined against the setting sun, holding a baby in his arms.

"I could not come earlier," he said. "The baby was born only last night."

"Ah, you are at the inn?" the officer asked.

"No, we arrived too late. My son was born in an animals' feeding trough."

"Your name?" - - - "Joseph."

"Of what tribe?" - - - "The tribe of Benjamin and David -- we are descendents of the kings." he added.

The officer did not look up. The world was full of the sons of former kings, and now there was no king but Caesar.

"Your wife's name?" - - - "Mary."

"And the baby?" - - - "Jesus."

The voice of the big man was soft, as though fondling the syllables - - "It means Saviour of all people."

The officer merely nodded. "Jesus, son of Joseph, of the tribe of Benjamin" he wrote. And closed the book. It was the last name on the list.

You don't have to look for any other name. That is it! -- God's final, perfect, complete revelation. Now . . . and forever. That's why Christmas is Christmas.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)